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FEATURE NOVEL

- **THAT TEXICAN TORNADO-MAN!** *by* WALT COBURN

TWO NOVELETTES

- **TINHORN TRAIL TO NOWHERE** *by* WILLIAM HEUMAN
- **WELCOME HOME, SADDLE-TRAMP!** *by* RULAND WALTNER

- BLACKBURN
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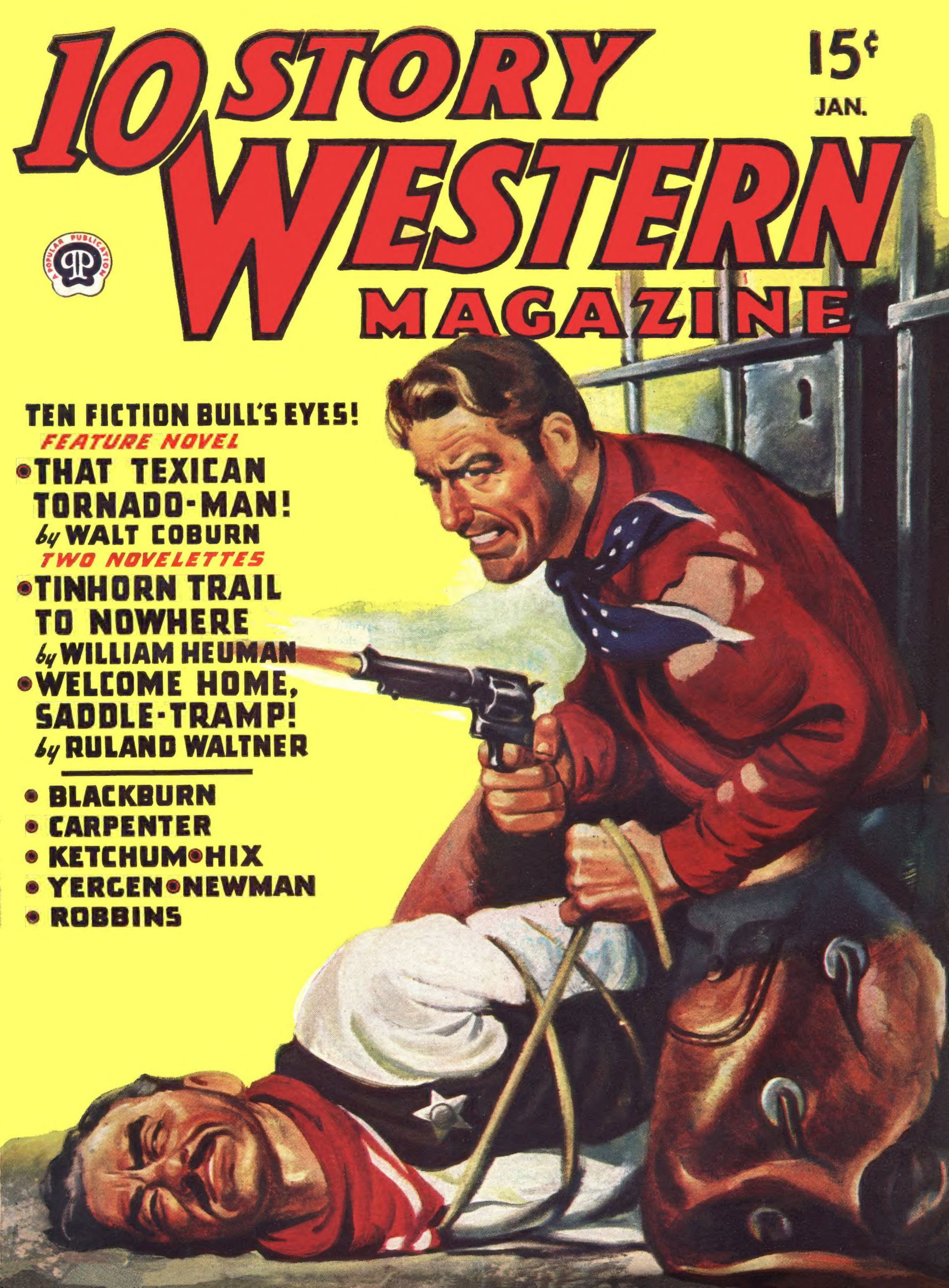

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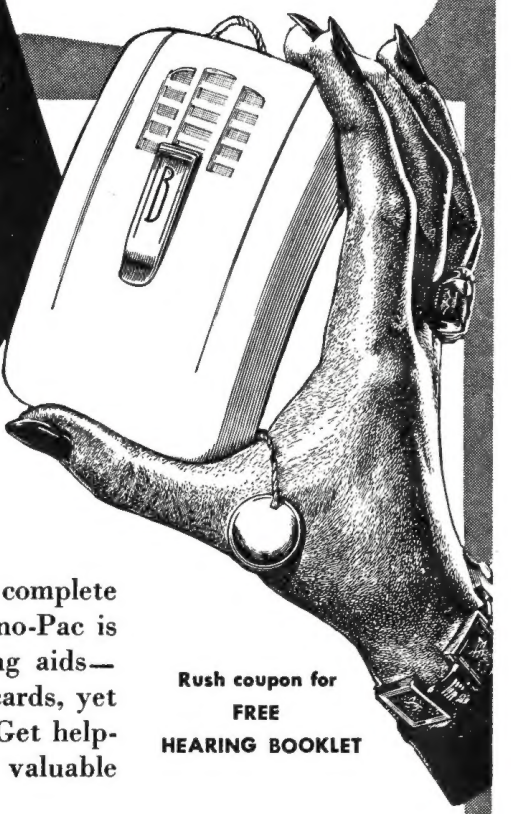

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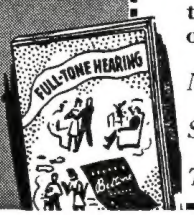

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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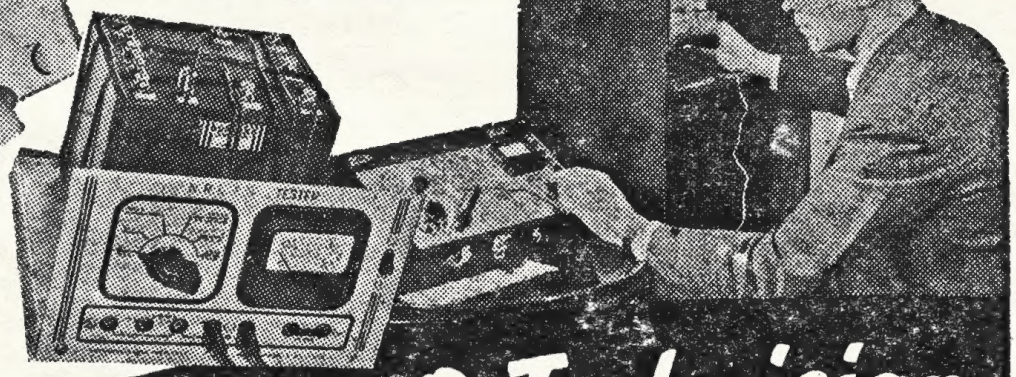

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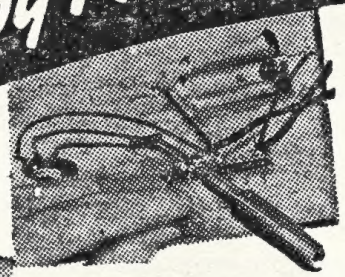

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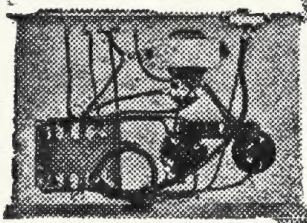

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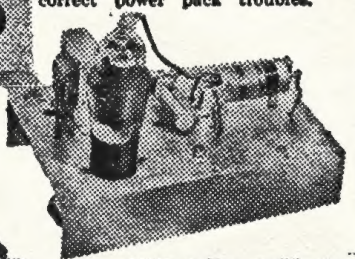

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Next issue

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Published January 10th

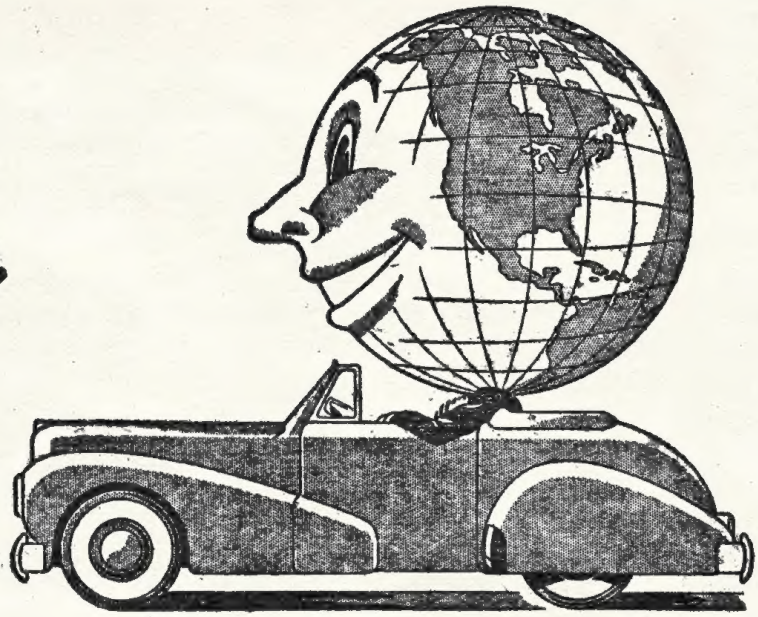
A strand of bailing wire caught Johnny Hardluck and swept him from his saddle. Johnny had been right peaceable, riding through the night, minding his own business. When he gathered his senses, Johnny figured there must be something very ominous about a ranch that strung bailing wire at night.

But the wire didn't keep out two murderous gunhawks. They rushed in as Johnny, befriended by Rancher Parnell, was trying to learn the mystery of his wired-in ranch. When Johnny saw that the gunmen were going to murder Parnell, Johnny took a hand—and shot the gunman nearest him.

Taking the corpse of the gunhawk he had killed in to the sheriff, Johnny Hardluck decided that he didn't trust Slim, the ranch-hand Parnell had sent along as a guide. Slim was surly and touchy—and he grabbed for his gun when Johnny asked suddenly: "Struck any color, Slim?"

Sue Parnell, the rancher's daughter, was a lady who didn't belong on this wild, gun-blasted frontier. But Sue took a shine to Johnny Hardluck—which could be good or bad for Johnny. . . . The complete story will be told in the next issue by Branch Carter in his novel—"Six Slugs for Johnny Hardluck."

PUTTING THE WORLD ON WHEELS



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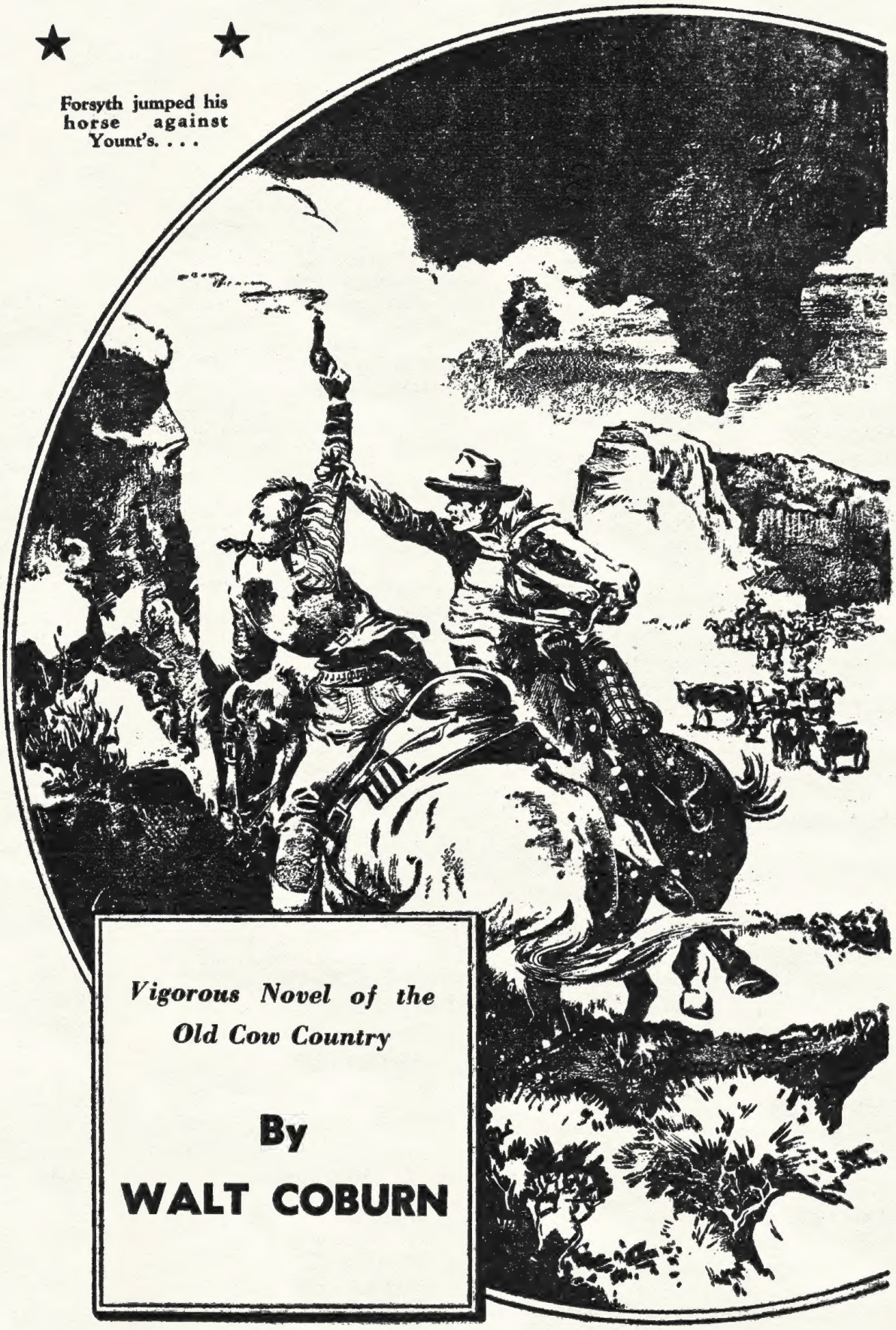


Forsyth jumped his horse against Yount's. . . .

Vigorous Novel of the Old Cow Country

By

WALT COBURN

THAT TEXICAN TORNADO-MAN!

CHAPTER 1 Masked Mission

Bob Plunkett pried his eyelids open. Throbbing pain slammed them shut again. But he got a brief glimpse of heavy log walls and a small iron-barred window set up close to the beamed ceiling. The pain kept pounding against his skull from the inside, swept over him and bathed him with cold, clammy sweat. He lay back, kept his eyes shut—and tried to think it out.

Down along the Mexican border, some of the old adobe houses have iron bars across the windows. But this wasn't the Mexican border. This was up in Montana Territory where a lot of houses and cabins are built from pine logs. Only the jail house has iron bars on the windows. Add it up any way you had a mind to and it tallied up the same. It looked like Bob Plunkett, Texan, was in a Montana jail.

A swarm of yellow-jacket hornets were building a nest inside his skull. Somebody had poured a lot of poison into him and it was splashing around inside his belly. Then they had stuffed his nostrils full of corral mud so that he had to breath through his

Being a diplomat was not Texas Bob Plunkett's long suit—but as a cattle-pool rep he had to make friends with a tough roundup crew he had beaten to a frazzle in a barroom brawl.

open mouth. Pack rats had built a nest in his mouth and lined it with fuzz chawed off from old saddle blankets. And while he was asleep a mule had kicked him in the belly. The best bet now was to lay back and play possum—or the mule might come back.

On the other hand, if he laid quiet, the hospitable citizens of this two-bit Montana cowtown might come in and dump him into a pine box and take him out to the boothill and plant him deep. Bob Plunkett groaned and got his legs hung over the edge of the jail bunk and pushed himself up to a sitting position. He held his face in his hands till the dizziness slacked up. Then he got his eyes open to slits, shuttered them against the sunlight streaming in the barred window. His shirt was ripped and crusted with dried blood and his thick, wiry black hair was matted with blood that still oozed from a ripped scalp.

Then he heard the clump of bootheels, the jangle of big jail keys and men's voices.

". . . so he could be the right man for the job," said a low-toned, cautious voice. "He's a rank stranger. And tough as a boot. He claimed he could lick any man in the house and he was on his way to prove it when somebody bent a gun barrel acrost his head. But before he got beefed he taken 'em on as fast as they come at him. And a grin on his face like it was all in fun. And every time he knocked down a man he'd howl like a wolf.

" 'Ayee Chichuhua!' he'd holler. And never once did that Texan kick or tromp a man he'd knocked down. And he never clawed once for his gun. He's cold nerved and level headed, drunk as he was. And it taken the whole Mashed O outfit to pull down that curly wolf—and the toughest of 'em had a bellyfull of it when that big Mashed O ramrod Yount slipped up behind the Texan and hit him between the horns with a six-shooter barrel. Only way that big Jay Yount could cool the Texan off. . . . Just might be that the Texan is the man you're lookin' for, Sheriff."

"What was that Duke Forsyth doin' while the ruckus was goin' on?" drawled a slow, quiet voice.

"The Duke was straddle of the bar hollerin' 'Yoicks!' The Texan had bloodied the Britisher's nose. Yount had hauled his boss clear of the ruckus and slung him up on the bar and out from underfoot. And nobody paid no attention to Forsyth when he kept hollerin' at his outfit to make it fair play and sportin'."

A big key rattled in the lock of the barred door. The short paunchy man with the drooping, reddish gray moustache had a law badge pinned to his unbuttoned vest. A faint grin was on his beefy, weathered face.

Bob Plunkett's grin was a ghastly grimace in a blood-caked mask.

"Pull up your chair, Sheriff," Bob Plunkett gestured at the bare cell. His voice was dry throated, no more than a croaking whisper.

"Send Doc here," said the sheriff. "Gimme that bottle you bin nibblin' at, Phil."

Bob Plunkett refused the whiskey. Phil, the jailer, fetched a bucket of cold water, a dipper, a big tin basin and a clean towel.

The Texan drank a lot of cold water. Finally he agreed to try a few swallows of the forty-rod whiskey to stop the quivering inside his cold belly.

The sheriff's name was Hank Peck and he cussed softly while he helped the Doc do a hemstitching job on the Texan's ripped scalp. He made Bob Plunkett strip to the hide and sent the jailer out for an outfit of clean clothes. Then the sheriff sloshed buckets of cold water on the Texan until Bob Plunkett said he had enough. Bob Plunkett rubbed down with a big coarse towel. Doc then took a bottle of good whiskey from his long shabby old black medicine bag and they all had a big drink while Bob Plunkett got dressed in his new clean clothes.

The lanky, bleary-eyed Phil fetched over a beefsteak breakfast from the Chink's. A can of cold tomatoes laced with pepper sauce and the strong black coffee, the steak and spuds, made a banquet. The pain slacked up inside the Texan's skull and he felt human when he twisted a cigaret into shape and lighted it. Finally Sheriff Hank Peck and the Texan were left alone. The law officer had been sizing up Bob Plunkett all the time.

BOB PLUNKETT was a six footer. His wide shoulders tapered down to a flat belly, lean flanks and long, saddle-bowed legs. His hair was wiry black and his eyes, bloodshot and slitted and discolored from the beating he had taken, were slate gray. He had a good jaw and mouth and a jutting nose. His flat-lipped grin showed big white

teeth. He was just about thirty years old.

"I come up the trail with the LFD herd," Bob Plunkett told the sheriff. "When we delivered the cattle at Miles City I drifted some, ridin' the grubline and hittin' a few cowtowns. This is the purtiest cow country I ever hoped to see. But I don't know if a ol' Texas boy kin stand your Montana blizzards. I reckon I'll drift back to Texas where the climate fits my clothes.

"If you're lookin' for snake tracks along my back trail, it's a waste of time. My daddy was a ranger captain. I rode with the Texas Rangers a few years. Wanted to see what the country north looked like and come up the trail with the LFD herd. When I git drunk I raise a little hell. I got no sense thataway. And no kick ner holler a-comin', if I over-match myself. That about tells it. I got enough money hid down in my boot to pay the damages, providin' the fine for drunk and disorderly conduct don't run too high here in your Montana country."

Sheriff Hank Peck gnawed a ragged end of his drooping moustache, then smoothed it out with a blunt thumb. "You got a raw deal from that Mashed O outfit, Plunkett. Jay Yount ramrods it. He's the feller that whopped you acrost the head with a six-shooter. . . . Mebbyso you'd like some revenge?"

"I got no more than I was askin' for. But if the chance turned up and the sign was right I might tackle the gent. But I ain't goin' out of my way a-hunting trouble. That's a fool's game—when a man is a rank stranger in a strange land. I'd as soon ride away from it."

Sheriff Hank Peck grinned faintly. "Which is lyin', Plunkett? Your tongue or your eyes?"

Bob Plunkett's grin was a little wry. "You're a hard man to fool, Sheriff. I ain't used to bein' pistol whipped."

"No man like it. Who swapped you that horse you rode here?"

"Squawman down at the Bull Island Crossin' on the Missouri. Named Gillespie. Floyd Gillespie."

"It's a stolen horse."

"Gillespie said he'd just traded for the geldin'. I taken his word for it. . . . That makes me a horsethief, sheriff?"

"It's a Mashed O geldin'. They blotched the Mashed O when they worked it into Gillespie's Figure 8. Got a bill of sale?"

"Didn't ask for one. I swapped him a good sound honest geldin'. But I was gittin' the best of the deal. Or so I figgered till now."

"The Association is commencin' to bear down on horsethieves."

Bob Plunkett's slate gray eyes hardened. His voice grated. "Quit sparrin', Sheriff. Git down to brass tacks. I got drunk in your cowtown. Started a ruckus I couldn't finish. I got slammed into jail. You show up, and you git the Doc to patch me up. You wash me off an' feed me good likker an' take the wrinkles outa my belly with good grub and you stake me to store clothes. That ain't the way you treat a horsethief."

"Kinda hard to fool, yourself, Plunkett." Sheriff Hank Peck walked to the cell door he'd left unlocked. He swung it open and walked out and took a careful look around before he came back. He was carrying Bob Plunkett's cartridge belt and hostered six-shooter. He handed the belt and gun to the prisoner and left the door unlocked and standing ajar.

"There's no charge against you, Plunkett. You're free to go when you take a notion. And I'll write you out a bill of sale for the horse so the Law can't set you afoot. But before you pull out, I'd like to make you a proposition."

"Brass tacks," Bob Plunkett buckled on his gun. "Cold turkey. Lay 'em face up, Sheriff."

Sheriff Hank Peck said, "I just got back to town, Plunkett. I bin gone a week. I was called to attend a secret meetin' of the Cattlemen's Association. There's some wholesale cattle rustlin' goin' on. The Association kin use a good man—a stock detective. They want a man who ain't known around here, a man who has the brains and guts to do that kind of work. It's the same kind of work you did when you was a Texas Ranger. It calls for a man who don't scare easy and can't be bought off. It's dangerous—but it pays big money."

Bob Plunkett grinned faintly and shook his bandaged head. "I don't feel that dangerous. I still got a hunderd dollars."

"You'd be reppin' for the Milk River Pool," Sheriff Hank Peck went on, "You'd work with the Mashed O roundup that starts gatherin' beef in about ten days. You'd represent about fifteen Pool irons.

But your main job would be to keep tally on how much Mashed O stuff gets worked into Floyd Gillespie's Figure 8—mavericks, sleeper-marked weaned calves.

"Jay Yount is the Mashed O wagon boss. Gillespie will have two reps with the Mashed O wagon. Your job don't call for any kind of gun arguments. Fact is, if you git propositioned by Yount to throw in with the rustlin', you do so. Gather enough evidence backed by solid proof to give the Association a surefire case against Jay Yount and Floyd Gillespie.

"Play the cards as Yount deals 'em. Fetch your evidence to me and we'll take it to the Association. It's a range detective job. And you're made to order for it. And you kin just about write your own ticket, if you handle the job right. But before you give me any kind of answer I'm goin' to warn you that it will be the most dangerous job you ever tackled. The stock detectives who have tackled it in the past few years ran into bad luck. None of them lived long enough to turn in a full report. Jay Yount is playin' for big stakes. And he plays for keeps. And Floyd Gillespie is cunning and dangerous."

Bob Plunkett asked, "Who is this big, red-faced British fellow with the yellow hair?"

"DICK FORSYTH. They call him the Duke. He's one of them Britisher younger sons who will git a title and a castle when his older brothers die off. The Mashed O is a British-owned outfit. Jay Yount ramrods it. Dick Forsyth is a remittance man sent over to rep for the Englishmen who own the Mashed O. Duke spends most of his time hunting, or runnin' coyotes with a pack of hounds he's got. Jay Yount keeps the Duke in likker, sees to it that the Duke stays amused. When big game is outa season and the Duke tires of follerin' his hound pack, there's the girls over at the honkatonk. Or Yount takes him down to the Figger 8 Ranch on the Missouri River. . . . While you was dickerin' that squawman outa that stolen horse, did you happen to take notice that Gillespie has two-three daughters? All of 'em comin' of age—and the oldest one in particular is easy on a man's eyes. Marie Gillespie is almighty pretty in any man's language. Or did you notice?"

A dull red flush mounted in the bruised, tanned face of Bob Plunkett.

The sheriff's puckered eyes twinkled. "Marie Gillespie," said Sheriff Hank Peck, "was supposed to be Jay Yount's girl—till Duke Forsyth got a look at her."

"I'll take that range detective job," Bob Plunkett said.

Sheriff Hank Peck knew when to leave well enough alone, when to keep his mouth shut. He had fired a shot in the dark and hit the bull's eye, and he let it go at that. Every cowpuncher who crossed the Missouri River at Bull Island and got a look at Marie Gillespie, rode away with his head somewhere in the stars and with some kind of a hazy notion of going back there some day and trying his luck again. And Marie had another notch on her coup stick.

Bob Plunkett from Texas was not immune. That little half-breed girl was something like a strange and rare and beautiful flower, the only wild flower of its kind, on the muddy banks of the old Missouri River. Jay Yount, from Nowhere, with the cold calculating heart of the proverbial gambler, had, so rumor told it, killed a man on her account. The big young Britisher Forsyth, heir to a share of the big Mashed O brand and a title and feudal castle somewhere was making, what he himself called, 'no end of a fool of himself' over this young half-breed squaw. . . . Now Bob Plunkett was declaring himself.

"I'll take that stock detective job," said Bob Plunkett grimly, "but I'll handle it in my own way."

Bob Plunkett from Texas heard himself make the declaration. And his battered mouth twisted in a sardonic grin. A man was a damned fool to let any female get a holt like that on him. And this one was a half-breed Injun squaw, at that. Her old man a blackleg rascal. Bob Plunkett thought back several days:

The Missouri River was swimming water; muddy and swift and filled with treacherous undercurrents. Bob Plunkett couldn't swim. He'd never learned how to handle a horse in bad water. Floyd Gillespie had taken him across in the rowboat. A slim girl with blue-black hair and gray-green eyes had swum his horse across. She'd worn a pair of faded old Levi overalls cut off like a boy's short pants to show hard, slim, brown legs, and a faded old

cotton shirt with the sleeves chopped off to the shoulder seams. She had taken the horse across behind the rowboat. Bob sat in the stern of the skiff and couldn't take his eyes off her.

Floyd Gillespie chuckled at the Texan's open, frank admiration. "Show this feller from Texas that can't swim," he called to his daughter, "some of your tricks."

Marie Gillespie had showed off with an almost childish eagerness. She slid off the back of the swimming horse and hung onto the horse's tail. Then she let go and swam alongside with swift, easy, overarm strokes, her slim brown legs scissoring the water. Her heavy braids came loose and her hair fanned out on top of the water. She slid over on her side and swam a sidestroke and her red lips opened and her teeth showed white in a laughter that had no sound. And her eyes were shining into the eyes of the Texan who sat high and dry in the rowboat with his saddle.

There had been a gay, mocking challenge in the gray-green eyes of the half-breed girl. Then she slid one wet brown leg across the back of the swimming horse; rode him ashore, her wet Levi pants and the cotton shirt soaked skin tight to the rounded contours of her slim body.

Marie Gillespie slid from the horse's back and onto dry ground on the north side of the river. Her squawman father nosed the skiff onto a sandbar and Bob Plunkett climbed out with his saddle.

Before he got there with his saddle the girl had gone. She had run up to where the north bank rose twenty feet high in a sheer straight claybank drop to the river below. And she stood there on the high bank for a long moment, her slim figure outlined against the sky, the wet heavy hair in a blue black veil down her back to her slim waist. While the Texan stared the girl dove in a clean swift arc, her arms pointed to knife the water. She went out of sight below the muddy surface.

Bob Plunkett had watched for her to come up. Seconds—seconds that seemed to lengthen into minutes. And she did not come to the surface of the water. Fear gripped the Texan and he went cold and empty inside like his life was draining out of him and leaving him dead inside. Raised on the plains of Texas, Bob Plunkett had never learned to swim. He had a landlubber's deep vast respect and awe for deep water.

"She's drowned herself!" Bob Plunkett's voice had been torn from his aching throat.

A gay rippling mocking echo came from a hundred yards downstream. She had stayed underwater with the swift current. Her black hair spread out across the water, red lips parted, white teeth flashing. She was laughing at him, teasing him. Her slim brown arm lifted and she waved. Rolling over onto her back, she blew him a farewell kiss with both hands. Then the half-breed girl was swimming back across the wide river with a long overhand stroke she had taught herself. Then she was ashore on the south bank and gone.

Marie Gillespie had never spoken to Bob Plunkett. When she swam his horse across was the only time he had seen the squawman's daughter. That was as close as the Texan had come to knowing her.

CHAPTER 2 No Camp Fightin'

Two weeks from the morning Bob Plunkett had awakened in jail at the cowtown of Alkali, Montana, he rode up at sundown to where the Mashed O roundup was camped on Dry Beaver Creek. The rip in his scalp was mended and his face no longer bore the marks of the beating he'd taken. He was forking the horse he'd gotten from Floyd Gillespie in a swap. His roundup bed, blankets and soogans and bed tarpaulin were roped with a diamond hitch on a bed horse. The ten horses in his Milk River Pool string were tops. They were in half a dozen different Pool brands. Hank Peck had hand-picked the string of cowhorses for the Milk River Pool rep.

The Mashed O was one outfit that drew no line at booze. There was always a keg of the best whiskey at the main log house where Duke Forsyth lived alone; a keg at the log cabin where Jay Yount lived apart from his men; a bottle in almost every bunk in the bunkhouse. Even the cook had a jug in his kitchen. Whiskey was on the grub list that was sent out to each winter line camp. And on the roundup there was a keg of forty-rod whiskey in the mess wagon.

But Jay Yount laid down the law that no man who worked for the Mashed O could

get drunk to the point where he couldn't do his job or interfered in any way with the other hired hands. You handled your booze right or you got whipped and run off by Jay Yount.

But Duke Forsyth was a little more than tipsy this evening when Bob Plunkett, repping for the Milk River Pool, rode up to the shake-down camp on Dry Beaver. And Floyd Gillespie's oldest half-breed son, Wade Gillespie, repping for the Gillespie Figure 8 iron, was Injun-drunk.

Bob Plunkett hazed his string of Pool horses into the remunda that was being corraled by the horse wrangler. He rode over to the bed wagon, leading his bed-horse. And he let on not to notice the way every man in the Mashed O outfit was staring at him, eyeing him narrowly, remembering when and where and under what circumstances they had last seen this tall Texan.

Jay Yount stood there at the little open campfire they had built between the mess wagon and bed wagon. The outfit had butchered and some of the cowpunchers had cut off ribs and were roasting them on branding irons shoved into the open fire. Most of the outfit were squatted around the fire on their hunkers.

Yount was a big man, a six footer with bulging shoulders, a bull neck and thick thighs. He had reddish sandy hair and a reddish mustache with twisted ends curling up from the corners of a thick-lipped, brutal mouth. His jaw muscles knotted below his ears. His nose had been broken and never set right. And from under sun-bleached brows his eyes were a pale blue-green color, shallow and merciless.

Beside Yount stood the big strapping half-breed son of the squawman Floyd Gillespie. Wade Gillespie was somewhere in the twenties, rawboned and loose jointed. His stride was a trifle longer and looser than the short stiff gait of the average cowpuncher. It came from moccasin tracking after deer and elk and mountain lion. He took Duke Forsyth on hunting trips. Forsyth had named him Moccasin Tracks because Wade Gillespie, on the trail of a lion or bear in the late fall, left his moccasin tracks in the snow for slower men like Forsyth to follow.

Wade Gillespie looked at the gelding Bob Plunkett was riding, then at Bob Plunkett in the double-rigged Texas saddle. Wade's grin was loose and his eyes glowed red from drinking. Wade hadn't been at Bull Island Crossing when Bob Plunkett had swapped horses with the squawman. Then Wade saw the blotched brand.

"That's one of mine," Wade Gillespie's voice was thick. "Where in hell'd you steal that roan horse of mine, Mister?"

IT WAS the first time Bob Plunkett had ever laid eyes on Wade Gillespie but Sheriff Hank Peck had tipped the Texan off to the half-breed's drunken traits and warned him to avoid any clash with Wade Gillespie.

Bob Plunkett took the bill of sale the sheriff had given him. He leaned from his saddle and shoved it at the big half-breed who lurched toward him.

Wade Gillespie slapped the folded paper from the Texan's hand. Wade's eyes were red and bloodshot and ugly.

"I say, old man, don't act the ruddy idiot." Duke Forsyth dropped the branding iron with its roasting rib. He reached the gangling 'breed in a couple of long strides and grabbed the back of Wade's shirt. He yanked the 'breed off balance on his unsteady legs. Wade Gillespie fell over backward, arms windmilling.

Forsyth was big and young, his skin sunburned and his nose always peeling. His hair was the color of new rope and his eyes were sky blue. He had pulled an oar on the Oxford crew; played rugby and soccer; rated one of the crack polo players of the British Empire. He straddled the fallen half-breed and grinned down at him.

"Yanked you out of your bally moccasin tracks, what? Jolly well in time to prevent your makin' a bloody jackass of yourself, old Moccasin Tracks. All in a spirit of good clean fun and all that rot. . . . Damme if it ain't the Texas chap. The ruddy gladiator from the Lone Star Empire of Texas. I've racked my feeble brain to recall the gallant warcry that resounded as you voiced the mighty challenge. When I sobered up sufficiently to make inquiries, Sheriff Hank Peck informed me that you'd been released from his cowtown bastile and departed, destination unknown. It's an honor and a pleasure to grip the hand that tapped the claret from various and sundry Mashed O noses—including mine. . . . Would it be out of order if I made an odd request? It's

worried me no end, you know. What I mean, old man, would you mind too much giving voice to the ruddy warcry?"

Bob Plunkett was grinning. There was something about the big Britisher that reached out and claimed a man's friendship. Bob Plunkett shook his head. "Only when I'm drunk. And I'm workin' now on crick water."

"Quite understandable. But the condition can be remedied. Good old Jay Yount furnishes the wherewithal. . . . Speakin' of our estimable Yount—step forth, Jay, old chap. Bury the bloody tomahawk and fill the pipe of peace. Make welcome the Texas chap who has come, I take it, to represent the Milk River Cattle Pool."

Jay Yount's grin never touched his pale eyes. "You're reppin' for the Pool, Plunkett?"

Bob Plunkett nodded. "Providin'," he looked straight into the pale eyes of the big Mashed O ramrod, "you got no big objections."

"It ain't my hide. Unsaddle and slip your pack. Strap a bell on one of that string of bunch quitters you fetched. And ketch your night horse. My nighthawk can't put in too much time ridin' down a good Mashed O horse a-fetchin' back rep strings that pull out fer home the first night."

No rep has to stand horse guard in an outfit that has a good nighthawk watching the remuda. Nighthawk and horse wrangler are paid to look after the horses a rep fetches with him when he works with a roundup. Jay Yount was commencing to bear down at the first chance. But Bob Plunkett said nothing.

Wade Gillespie crawled on all fours from under Duke Forsyth's straddled legs. The gangling half-breed got to his feet and stood weaving on widespread legs. His red eyes fixed on the Texan, studying Bob Plunkett drunkenly, owlishly.

Bob unsaddled and turned the horse loose. He grinned faintly at the Mashed O cowpunchers, and more than one of them returned the grin one way or another so that the ice cracked a little.

"Holler," Wade Gillespie staggered a step towards Bob Plunkett. "Holler loud. The Duke claims you kin out-holler a drunk Injun. Let's hear you holler—you damned horsethief!"

The gangling 'breed came at the Texan, fists doubled, arms flailing. Duke Forsyth shoved out a leg and tripped him. Wade Gillespie went sprawling and his face plowed the dirt.

"Drunken Injun!" Jay Yount stepped around the half-breed. "You think so much of your damn' Moccasin Tracks, Duke, drag him down to the crick and sober him up. Nobody'll miss him if you shove him in the bog and fergit where he sunk. He knows the Mashed O laws against a man gittin' drunk at camp."

Big Jay Yount swaggered over to where Bob Plunkett was standing. Yount had a habit of running a whizzer on strangers right at the start. If it worked, he kept up the nagging and rawhiding. If the stranger called his bluff, Jay Yount would like as not back down and crawl out of it in such a manner as to save his tough rep.

"Last time I seen you, Plunkett, you was a bellerin' longhorn on the prod. You fetchin' that same paw an' beller along?"

"Last time I recollect seein' you, Yount," said Bob Plunkett flatly, and he knew every man in camp was watching covertly and listening with both ears, "you slipped around me when I forgot to keep my back against the wall. I was told later that you bent a gun barrel acrost my head. I come here to rep for the Milk River Pool. But if you figger you got to pick it up where we left off, we might as well git it out of our systems now and here as fu'ther up the crick. . . . Name your game, Yount. And have at it."

There was a flat-lipped grin on Bob Plunkett's face. His slate-gray eyes were the color of cartridge lead. He watched Yount's pale eyes slide away and he knew Sheriff Hank Peck had told him the truth about Yount being yellow inside.

"The Mashed O," Jay Yount grinned his way out of it, "has got a law against fightin' in camp. Ketch your night horse, Plunkett, or cut your Pool string." Jay Yount turned and swaggered over to the mess wagon and filled a tin cup from the spigot of the whiskey keg.

Bob Plunkett wondered how far the Mashed O cowhands would back their yellow boss in a bad tight. He cut a searching look at them. They were swapping covert, meaning glances. One or two grinned faintly. One of them winked broadly at the Texan. Bob Plunkett unstrapped the ketch

rope from his saddle and went into the corral to rope his night horse.

"Stout fella," said Duke Forsyth as Bob Plunkett walked past him.

CHAPTER 3 Even Ramrods Break

Bob Plunkett stood about an hour's horse guard before he told the nighthawk he was going to camp and to bed. Yount had been awake when the Pool rep rode up and unsaddled and picketed his night horse. Bob Plunkett, knowing that Yount was watching, drank a cup of coffee and ate a hunk of pie at the mess tent before he turned in. Bob was ready to take his own part if the big ramrod tied into him about coming in too early from horse guard. But Yount let on he was asleep.

There was no day herd gathered. So Yount had to let the Pool rep ride morning circle. But Yount led a long circle and he kept Bob Plunkett with him until all the circle riders had been paired and dropped off at intervals, scattered in a wide circle. Yount was well within his rights in so doing. It was an old trick—and Bob Plunkett let Yount work it. The trick was to set a rep afoot, drop him twenty-thirty miles from camp—tell him to fetch in what cattle he picked up. It would take a man or two men till after dark to fetch cattle in from that far, even if he hazed his drive to a trot. Only a greenhorn would be fool enough to make a try at gathering any cattle to fetch to the hold up ground from that distance.

But it put a rep a long, long ways from camp and he'd be forking a leg weary horse after he'd followed a hard-ridin gent like Jay Yount. Yount rode top circle horses and he high-trotted his men till their brains jarred inside their skulls. And if the man he dropped on the outside circle wasn't very well mounted he was left out there to ride a sweaty, leg-weary horse to camp.

Yount had a habit of setting his reps afoot forty miles from nowhere. He took a sadistic delight in watching some rep leading a played-out horse to camp about sundown.

Sheriff Hank Peck had tipped Bob Plunkett off to Yount's trick of side-tracking reps so that they wouldn't be on hand for the branding.

"You got four ridge-runners in your string," Hank pointed out the four horses he meant, "that will foller anything Yount's got in his Mashed O string and beat him back to camp from one of them outside forty mile circles. Any one of them four ridge runners will out-distance what Yount's got. And they'll fetch you into camp head and tail up. So say nothin'. Beat him at his own long circle game."

Just in case Bob Plunkett took a notion to make something of an issue of it, Yount fetched Wade Gillespie along on the same outside circle. The gangling half-breed had a bad hangover and was red eyed and sullen. The high-trotting pace that Yount set hadn't done a thing to help put Wade Gillespie in a better frame of mind or body. The long geared half-breed stood in his stirrups and spat cotton. He was surly and silent, on the prod.

Yount hadn't calculated on Duke Forsyth coming along on that outside circle. He tried to drop the Duke with the first few pairs of circle riders. But the big sunburned Britisher shook his blond head and said he was going all the way around. And he was riding a big stout Mashed O gelding that would take him all the way.

"I'm on the lookout," Duke Forsyth smiled amiably, "for wolves."

They were a long twenty-mile ride from camp when Yount pulled up to blow his horse. Bob Plunkett's big brown gelding had his second sweat dried and looked good for another twenty or forty miles. Yount cut a hard look at Plunkett's horse, and scowled.

"You never explained it to Wade Gillespie, Plunkett," Yount grinned crookedly, building a cigarette, "how come you was forkin' one of his horses."

Bob Plunkett had picked up the bill of sale Wade had slapped out of his hand last evening. He pulled it out of his chaps pocket.

"It's signed," Bob said to the gangling 'breed, "by Sheriff Hank Peck. The sheriff said the Figure 8 had been worked from the Mashed O and the job was blotched by the brand artist. I swapped Floyd Gillespie a good horse for that 'un. It's a matter I kin take up with Floyd Gillespie some time. You want a look at this paper, Wade?"

Wade Gillespie shook his head. "No." His black brows pulled in a scowl.

Bob Plunkett shoved the bill of sale back

into the pocket of his scarred leather chaps. "It don't look to me, Wade, like a big tough ramrod like Jay Yount would be so weak in the guts he'd shove his dirty chores off onto you—unless he was long headed enough to figger it out that he'd be settin' two reps afoot on the outside circle. That's what could happen if the Gillespie Figure Eight rep and the Milk River Pool rep locked horns way to hell an' gone out here. . . . Ever hear the story fable about the monkey that used the cat to pull the hot chestnuts outa the coals? Seems to me that yarn was left unfinished. A burnt cat would turn on that monkey and claw the belly off him, to my way of thinkin'. . . ."

Wade Gillespie was studying the Texan with blood-shot eyes.

"A cowboy," smiled Duke Forsyth, "quoting Aesop's Fables. Furthermore, goin' Aesop one better. Fancy that!"

Bob Plunkett was eyeing Jay Yount. The white cigarette paper in the big wagon boss's hands broke and spilled the Bull Durham flakes down his shirt front. The Texan's hand was near his gun and his slate-gray eyes were cold. Then Bob Plunkett's white teeth bared in a flat-lipped grin.

"Let's you'n me rassle, Yount."

THE Texan slid his gun from its holster and held it by its blued steel barrel, the ivory-handled butt towards Duke Forsyth. "Hold this while I give your big ramrod that chance he wants to dirty my back. No fightin' at camp, he says. This ain't camp. . . . Hand your smoke-pole to Wade Gillespie, Yount. Or hang onto it if you need an equalizer. I'll give you that much odds and gamble on your not slippin' up behind me again to bend it acrost my thick skull."

The Texan was wearing a pair of old bullhide chaps with only the two upper snaps on each left fastened. He freed the snaps and jerked loose the belt buckle at the back so that the chaps hung straddle of his saddle when he stepped off his horse onto the ground.

Big Jay Yount was left no alternative. He could not crawl out of that kind of a direct challenge. He had to fight. He eyed the tall Texan as he handed his six-shooter to Wade Gillespie and dismounted. He was wearing a pair of fringed leather chaps that he had to pull off and his hand slid into a chaps pocket and came out clenched and when he straightened up he dropped the chaps and charged the Texan without warning.

The stock-knife Yount had slid from his chaps pocket was open and its three-inch blade ripped a shallow gash on Bob Plunkett's shoulder. Bob twisted sideways when the knife blade slashed and he hooked a hard right into Yount's face. The blow rocked the big ramrod's head sideways.

Then the Texan made a swift grab for Yount's wrist, and he used both hands to twist Yount's arm back in a hammerlock. They went down together in a pile-up. Bob twisted Yount's forearm and wrist until the three-inch blade bit deep into the big ramrod's back. Yount let out a yelp and let go of the knife.

Bob released the hammerlock and drove half a dozen short vicious jabs into Yount's face. Blood spurted from the big ramrod's smashed nose, the pain blinding him. Bob Plunkett scrambled to his feet. His boot heel snapped the knife blade.

Bob Plunkett kicked Yount onto his feet and they went at it. No holds barred and it was any man's fight while it lasted. Both men were battered and bloody and their shirts ripped to tatters and they were blowing and sodden with blood and sweat. Yount slipped and went down on one knee and came up with a rock in his hand. Bob Plunkett put all the force and strength he had left into the haymaker.

It caught Yount on the point of his bulging jaw. His pale, blood-shot eyes rolled back as his head lobbed sideways. His big legs hinged and the rock slid from his hand. Jay Yount went down and out in a shapeless heap.

Bob Plunkett turned and walked over to where his horse stood. Without taking time to get his wind or wipe the dirty sweat and blood from his face, the Milk River Pool rep mounted his horse. He rode alongside Forsyth and held out an unsteady skinned, dirty hand.

"I'll take back my gun."

"Righto." The red-faced British man handed the Texan his six-shooter butt foremost.

Bob Plunkett had the ivory-handled gun in his hand when he looked at Wade Gillespie. "You got ary notion of takin' it up where Yount left off?"

The half-breed shook his head. There

was a faint grin on his swarthy face. "You kin keep that horse, Plunkett." There was a different look now in the half-breed's eyes. The red hatred was gone.

Bob Plunkett rode away alone, at a long trot. He pushed the big gelding hard, but not too fast to play the horse out. The sun and wind dried the blood on his face, and his teeth grinned through that unsightly mask. Back at camp, he did not go to the wagon. The remuda was scattered and grazing. The horse wrangler stared at him slack jawed as the Texan shook a loop in his ketch rope and quietly snared a horse out of his string.

The branding had started when Bob Plunkett got there. A Mashed O cowhand stared hard at him as he rode into the bunched cattle. The Texan's loop dipped and picked up the hind legs of a big unbranded calf that had the Mashed O earmarks. Plunkett dragged the bawling calf up to the branding fire. Two of the calf rasslers took it.

"Quarter Circle T!" Bob Plunkett called out one of the Milk River Pool brands. "Crop the marks outa both ears."

"Them's the Mashed O earmarks, Mister."

Bob Plunkett shook his head. "No brand on the hide to match 'em. This pore thing has no mammy. This is Milk River Pool range, Misters. Till that big yellow-bellied ramrod comes alive an' gits here to tell you fellers different, you'll burn on the brands as I call 'em. . . . Any of you hombres want to gun-argue the question?" Bob Plunkett's hand was on his gun. The grin on his blood-caked face wasn't pleasant.

"Gather in your marbles, Plunkett," said the man handling the branding irons. "Looks like Jay Yount done lost his taw, boys."

THEY didn't seem to be sore about it. On the contrary, they enjoyed it as if it was a big josh on the Mashed O wagon boss. The Milk River Pool rep shook a fresh loop in his rope as he rode back to the herd.

The branding had barely started. Bob Plunkett read the fresh brand on a big mammyless calf. The brand was Gillespie's Figure 8. Then he looked at the earmarks. Gillespie's earmarks were split the left ear and swallow-fork the right. The split was old enough to be haired-over. The notch of the swallowfork was fresh, drops of blood on the gristle. To the Texan's trained eye, the thing was quite obvious. The Mashed O earmarks were split the left ear and oversharp the right ear. The oversharp mark had been cut into the deeper notch called the swallowfork.

The calf had been sleeper-marked with the Mashed O earmarks. But the Mashed O cowhands had given the sleeper-marked calf to Gillespie.

"One for little Marie," grinned the Mashed O cowpuncher tophand who was doing the roping. Then he pointed to a maverick that wore a fresh Mashed O. "One of ourn," he said.

"Drag it back to the fire," The Milk River Pool rep pointed to the maverick they'd put in the Mashed O iron. "Bar the Mashed O for a mistake. Burn on the XL. One of my Pool irons. Only mavericks the Mashed O or Figure 8 takes on this Pool range, will have to be taken away from this Milk River Pool rep with a gun. . . . Make your choice right now." The Texan's hand was again on his gun.

The Mashed O tophand bowed stiffly and lifted his sweat-marked Stetson with good natured mockery.

"We're tippin' our Mashed O hats to the Milk River Pool rep this day, Plunkett. . . . What shape did you leave the big ramrod in?"

"About the way I look. Only Yount was sleepin' his off when I left him with Wade Gillespie and Duke Forsyth."

"They was both there?"

"On the far outside circle," said Bob Plunkett. "When you drag that 'un up for a mistake vent, you kin stay on the edge of the herd and rest your pony. When I'm done heelin' this Pool stuff you kin ride in' and swing your loop."

"Till Yount shows up to tell us different, Plunkett, you're the doctor. But if you forget Marie, you're no gentleman."

He was humming Sweet Marie as he heeled the maverick that wore the fresh Mashed O.

Bob Plunkett grinned flatly. So that was how they tallied the Figure 8 mavericks—for Marie Gillespie. The Texan had his doubts if little Marie ever cashed in a dollar on the Figure 8 brand.

The Mashed O cowpunchers were quick

to recover from the shock of having mavericks branded in the Pool irons. And now when the Milk River Pool rep dragged up one and sang out another Pool brand they began joshing him. And Bob Plunkett took it for a good sign. Those cowhands wouldn't josh a man they had it in for. Not the way they grinned when they hoorawed him.

"No new shoes for Marie? You're a hard hearted son, Plunkett!"

"How's Marie gonna git a new red dress for to go to the Mashed O roundup dance? Don't be so doggoned cold-blooded, Bob!"

"Doggoned Milk River Pool rep ain't got the manners of a sheepherder. You married and true to your missus an' kids, mebby?"

"Mebbyso the pore feller never laid eyes on Marie. . . ."

"Mebbyso somebody told him she's Yount's best gal!"

"I got it from Wade she never let that big lyin' ramrod so much as hold her hand."

"Then Yount lied!"

"Damn right he lied. Any man claims he's ever kissed Marie Gillespie is a liar and a skunk to boot. . . . I'd kill a man what claimed she let him kiss her."

"Take it easy, son. Tuck in your shirttail. Keep them irons hot or that Milk River Pool rep from the Panhandle of old Texas will shoot your gizzard out. . . . Hot iron, here!".

The young cowpuncher tending the branding fire sweated. Bob Plunkett was dragging them up as fast as the two pairs of rasslers could grab 'em. The Milk River Pool rep marked 'em down in his tally book each time he rode back into the herd for another. His bruised face was smarting with the salty sweat that ran down from under the slanted crown of his hat. But he spared himself nor his horse until he had cleaned the herd of every maverick and sleeper-marked calf.

Then he rode back to the branding fire, his rope coiled and dropped over his saddle horn. He leaned down and dippered water from the bucket. Gulping down his fill he reached for cigarette makings. His horse stood blowing with the front cinch of his double-rigged saddle loosened.

"I'm obliged, cowboys," he said quietly, "for your kind assistance."

"Nary a one for Marie. Men have bin hung fer less, stranger."

"I'll take up that argument with Marie Gillespie, boys—" Bob Plunkett grinned—"on our weddin' day."

He hadn't meant to say that. It slipped out in an unguarded moment.

Somebody whistled faintly. Another grunted. They eyed him with open scorn.

"What you smokin' with that Bull? Marijuana, Plunkett?"

Another said, "Duke Forsyth is takin' her back to that big castle of his in England. He'll put a diamond-studded, gold crown on her head. She'll be Lady Duke Forsyth, and set next to the Queen and eat stewed canary bird's eyebrows off golden plates. Floyd Gillespie's got high falutin' idees fer his half-breed daughter Marie—"

A cowpuncher cut in, "Yonder comes the big dawg with the brass collar—Yount hisself. And Wade Gillespie, and the Duke. . . . Grab onto your bushy tail, Plunkett. Better shoot first—then ask Yount what he wants."

YOUNT and Wade Gillespie and Forsyth had stopped long enough at camp to change horses and take on grub. Yount had washed off and put on a clean shirt. His face showed signs of the ruckus and his eyes were blood-shot and wicked. His hand was on his six-shooter as he approached the branding crew. He was riding a little in the lead and he cut a look at the fresh-branded Pool stuff as he rode past the bunched cattle.

Wade Gillespie rode just behind Yount. One of the half-breed's eyes was swollen to a red slit and his lower lip was cut and swollen. Yount had come awake on the prod and tied into Wade for standing by and letting the big Mashed O ramrod take the worst of a whipping. Wade looked sullen and ugly and half drunk.

Duke Forsyth's eyes were blue and hard and bright in his sun-burned face. There was a grim set to the Britisher's jaw.

Jay Yount cut a hard, ugly, contemptuous look at his roundup crew. Then glared at Bob Plunkett. His gun slid from its holster.

"Cut your string, Plunkett." Yount's six-shooter pointed at the Texan's belly. Jay Yount was drunk enough to be dangerous now.

Bob Plunkett had expected something like this. No man could whip that big Mashed O ramrod and keep on working

with his outfit. The Texan nodded and reined his horse to head for camp.

"You're so damned tough!" snarled Yount. "Fill your hand with a gun, you Texan—" He thumbed his gun-hammer back.

Forsyth jumped his horse against Yount's. He slapped the gun from the big wagon boss's hand just as Jay Yount pulled the trigger on the cocked six-shooter. The bullet whined over Bob Plunkett's head.

"My foreman," the Britisher's voice cut through the gun echoes, "is not a cheerful loser. Cheerio and so long, old man. Accept my apology for the Mashed O's wretched hospitality."

Bob Plunkett had whirled his horse around. His gun was in his hand and pointed at Yount's big belly. Bob wanted to pull the trigger. Forsyth shook his head. The Texan reined his horse and headed for camp.

Bob Plunkett found his string of Milk River Pool cowhorses already cut out of the Mashed O remuda that the horse wrangler had corraled. And Bob's bed was roped on his bed horse. The horse wrangler said he'd loaded Bob's bed and cut his string for him on the big ramrod's orders. The cook handed Bob a clean towel, a bar of soap, a kettle of hot water and a bottle of arnica liniment; then a tin cup filled with whiskey. He told the Texan to drink hearty, and to put away enough grub to take the wrinkles out of his belly.

The cook then filled a quart bottle from the whiskey keg, tamped down the cork with the heel of his hand and told Bob to take it along in case of snakebite. Next he handed the Milk River Pool rep a sealed envelope with his name across it.

"The Duke said to hand you this. Open it after you git a long ways gone."

After eating and thanking the cook, Bob forked a fresh horse. The horse wrangler helped him haze his string of horses along the first mile. When he had ridden beyond sight of the Mashed O roundup camp Bob Plunkett opened the envelope. Forsyth's handwriting was nothing to brag about. But the contents of the brief note opened the Texan's eyes to the fact that the big Britisher was nobody's damned tenderfoot. Bob read:

"Take your string of Pool ponies and ride to Bull Island Crossing. The Figure 8 roundup is ready to start work. Hand the enclosed note to Floyd Gillespie. And give my fondest regards to Miss Marie Gillespie."

It was signed The Duke. There was a flourish to it. The Mashed O brand marked there like a regal coat of arms. The enclosed envelope wasn't sealed. The Texan was tempted to open it, but did not.

CHAPTER 4 Gunhawk Shoot-out

It was bright moonlight when Bob Plunkett reached the north bank of the Missouri River at Bull Island Crossing. A light showed in the window and open doorway at Gillespie's log-cabin saloon. The squawman sold booze and ran the ferryboat as sidelines to his cattle raising. He ferried when he pleased and told the others to swim the river if they wanted across.

When Bob Plunkett shouted across the river, the burly squawman, a Winchester rifle in the crook of his arm, came out of the saloon.

"Who the hell's a-hollerin' this time a night?" Floyd Gillespie's whiskey voice bellowed across the moonlit water.

"Bob Plunkett. I'm reppin' for the Milk River Pool. I got orders to throw in with your Figure Eight roundup."

"The hell yuh say! You ride back to Milk River, Mister. Tell 'em I'll gather their damned Pool cattle. I don't want no Pool rep workin' with my Figger Eight wagon. I run their last rep off with a doubled rope. . . . Bob Plunkett, eh? Never heard a you!"

"You swapped me a stolen horse a couple of weeks ago."

"You that long-geared Texan that got me drunk an' swapped me a two-bit cayuse fer the best cowpony in the Figger Eight remuda? I was drunker'n seven hunderd dollars. Set foot this side of the Missouri-an' I'll shoot the buttons off your shirt. Drag it fer home, Mister, before you git into trouble."

"Keep your shirt on, Gillespie. I got a message for you. It's a letter from Duke Forsyth. It was Forsyth sent me to rep with your Figure Eight roundup."

"You lyin' to me, Plunkett?"

"I don't have to lie to nobody, Gillespie."

"Why the hell didn't you say so in the first place? Duke Forsyth!"

Floyd Gillespie bellowed to his daughter. Marie! It's that Texan what can't swim a lick! He's got a string of Milk River Pool horses to fetch over! Git a move on!"

Floyd Gillespie came over in his rowboat. Marie swam past the rowboat and beat the squawman across. She stood there slim and brown in the moonlight with her heavy black hair tumbled to her waist. Her gray green-eyes looked into the Texan's as he dismounted.

"The Duke," said Bob Plunkett, "sent you his fondest regards."

Her face flushed a little. Her eyes darkened with some emotion. Bob read it for fear.

"What," he asked her bluntly, "are you afraid of? I want to help you. I'd be proud to have you trust me." He gripped her hands. They were cold.

Before she could give him a reply the rowboat nosed ashore. Floyd Gillespie's rifle covered the Texan.

"Give that letter from Forsyth," he growled, "to Marie. I can't read in this dim light."

Bob handed her the envelope. He struck a match and held the flame cupped in his hands to give her light enough to read the message. She read it aloud in a brittle voice that matched the fear in her eyes:

"Turn the Figure Eight outfit over to Bob Plunkett, bearer of this note. Then saddle your best horse and ride away. Never return. You are given this chance to escape the law because you are the father of Marie. Thus I keep my end of our bargain. Live up to your part of it, according to your lights. If Marie is harmed in any manner I have the utmost confidence in Bob Plunkett from Texas who will champion the lady in distress. Because you can neither read nor write I am taking a gamble on it being read aloud to you by Marie. And, I dare further hope, in the presence and hearing of Bob Plunkett from Texas. I cannot wish such a blackguard as you, Gillespie, any sort of Good Luck. Only Goodbye Forevermore. . . . Forsyth."

Floyd Gillespie stood there, a squat heavy-set figure on widespread legs. He was breathing heavily, murder in his eyes.

Bob Plunkett moved swiftly. He grabbed the barrel of the squawman's rifle, yanked it out of the gnarled hands and flung it aside. Then he slapped the barrel of his six-shooter alongside Floyd Gillespie's shaggy head. Bob clubbed him until the glittering eyes glazed and the bearded man stood swaying, both hands lifted in surrender.

"Don't hit me no more, you Texas—"

Bob Plunkett slapped the cursing mouth with his open hand. "Keep your cussin' clean, Gillespie. You're all Forsyth called you. But your daughter is a lady. If she wasn't here, I'd shoot you where you stand."

"Don't—don't kill him—" the girl's voice was a husky whisper. The color drained from her face. Her gray-green eyes were dark with fear.

"Forsyth trusts you," Bob Plunkett told him quietly. "I don't. I'll keep you covered till you git beyond gun range. Now row me acrost. . . . You'll come along, Marie?"

"I'll swim your horses across—if you'll promise not to kill him."

"That's a deal."

Marie had a little trouble getting the horses to take the water.

The squawman was gone when she reached the south bank.

"I thought your mother was here," said the Texan. "And your younger sisters."

"Floyd Gillespie's squaw isn't my mother. Wade and his young sisters and brothers are her children. Floyd Gillespie adopted me when I was a kid. But I never knew that until recently. Duke Forsyth got the truth out of that squawman when Duke made his deal to buy out Floyd Gillespie. Floyd Gillespie refused to tell the name of my real father. But I think Wade knows, and the Duke might get it out of that drunken half-breed. Not that it matters. As long as I know that thieving, whiskey-peddling, murdering squawman isn't my real father. . . . Which way did he go?"

"Down the river. He took a jug along."

Marie said: "He'll head for the Mashed O round-up and make bad medicine with Wade and Jay Yount. When the sign is right, they'll murder Duke Forsyth. Duke found out about their cattle rustling and horse stealing from the Mashed O outfit."

"I'm trusting you with all this because Duke Forsyth's note meant I could trust you. I helped Duke get proof that they

were stealing from the Mashed O. Jay Yount figured the English owners would sell out dirt cheap when the Mashed O began to lose money. Yount and Floyd Gillespie worked together, working the Mashed O brand into the Figure Eight iron.

Marie went on: "When Floyd Gillespie figured he had a chance to marry me to Forsyth, he double-crossed Yount and sold the Figure Eight to Duke Forsyth. . . . It was when Duke told the squawman that he'd come into a British title some day and could hardly introduce a half-breed wife to the King and Queen, that Floyd Gillespie admitted what I'd hoped and prayed was the truth of my suspicions. That Marie Gillespie wasn't my real name. That I had no Indian blood. He said my parents had been massacred by the Sioux."

Bob Plunkett said: "And when Forsyth gets his title and castle, he kin be almighty proud to introduce his wife to the King and Queen of England." Bitterness had crept into Bob Plunkett's voice.

He stood there looking down into the gray-green eyes of the girl who was still dripping wet from swimming the Pool string across the river. Her red lips parted slowly in a smile that crinkled the corners of the eyes that met his unflinchingly. Bob had the feeling she was laughing at him just a little.

"Yoicks!" came a shout from the north bank of the river. "Tallyho! I say, Plunkett, old Texan, are you there?" There was excitement, a tautness to the Britisher's voice.

"Kin you swim, Duke?" called Plunkett. "Don't keep the little lady waitin'."

"Swim? Like a ruddy duck."

THEY could see him ride into the black river. Forsyth was riding a good waterhorse. He was hanging onto the saddle horn when his horse lunged ashore. His sun-burned face had a drawn, strained look. The Britisher's blue eyes were squinted against the pain from a bullet-ripped shoulder. He had lost too much blood on the long gruelling ride from the Mashed O roundup camp.

Bob Plunkett hauled him from the saddle and helped him into the log saloon. The Texan poured whiskey down Duke's throat while Marie cut away his sodden blood-stained shirt and went to work on the bullet rip that had torn the shoulder muscle without breaking the bone. She cleansed and dressed and bandaged the bullet wound with swift skill. She said she'd had practice at such chores here at Bull Island Crossing. Forsyth never whimpered, just sat there with a tight grin on his face.

"They're no further than a hop, skip and bally jump behind me, old Texan."

"How many of 'em," asked Bob Plunkett.

"Yount and the treacherous Moccasin Tracks." The Britisher grinned faintly, "The estimable and crafty Yount wants no eye witnesses when he practices his side-profession of murder. . . . It was Moccasin Trucks who pinked me with a 30-30 bullet—payment for the thrashing I'd given him. When you rode away from where you'd knocked out Yount, Wade Gillespie fancied it was an excellent opportunity to dispose of an enemy. I took away his gun and gave the half-breed chap a sound thrashing. Something I'd been promising myself for many moons. . . . I managed to throttle a bit of information out of the rascal." Forsyth looked at the girl now.

"Your real name is Mary Duncan. Hoot, lassie, ye're a black Scot. Your mother died. Floyd Gillespie murdered your father at Bull Island Crossing for the gold that Bruce Duncan had panned along the sandbars. Gillespie would have drowned you, child, but his Assiniboine squaw hid you in the brush till Floyd Gillespie sobered up. And from then on the squaw protected you. Where is the good woman and her brood, Mary?"

"She took the kids and pulled out for the Reservation," said the girl. "Mary—Mary—I like that name."

"The name has simplicity," said Forsyth, "and beauty."

Bob Plunkett went outside. When he went out he closed the door quietly on the wounded Forsyth and the girl. He had taken a 30-30 carbine from a gun rack on the log wall of the saloon and he walked with it in the crook of his arm to where his horse and the Duke's horse stood saddled. He unsaddled and turned both horses loose in the feed corral. Then walked down to the river bank. He stiffened in his tracks when he heard the blowing of horses. Then he sighted three swimming horses out in the channel. The three riders had guns in

their hands. The moonlight reflected on the blued-steel barrels.

Jay Yount and Floyd Gillespie and the squawman's half-breed son, Wade, were coming to kill.

Bob Plunkett cut a look back across his shoulder. He saw the light go out in the log saloon. He thought he heard the door open and close. Then a silence. And from somewhere in the brush behind him the Texan heard the girl's voice, low-pitched, tense:

"Bob! Bob Plunkett! Where are you, Bob?"

"Here."

Then she was beside him there in the dark shadow. She had a saddle carbine in her hands.

"Forsyth—?" Bob whispered it.

"He passed out. He lost a lot of blood—and the pain took a lot out of him. The booze put him asleep. I'm glad. He'd be underfoot. Duke don't savvy this kind of a gun ruckus. . . . I'm going to kill the man who murdered my father, Bob. That squawman Floyd Gillespie. What do you think of a girl who would kill a man, Bob Plunkett?"

Bob's hand gripped the girl's shoulder. "I'd like to marry that girl."

"When? Her face was close to his, her eyes shining, her black hair tumbled. Her lips parted.

The lips were warm, clinging to his mouth there in the darkness.

The three horses were lunging into the shallow water now.

From the heavy brush along the river bank a voice barked:

"Throw away your guns and claw for the moon. I'm Sheriff Hank Peck. You three gents is under arrest."

Three guns spat streaks of flame and the gun echoes crashed back and forth across the river. From the brush came a grunt and Sheriff Hank Peck was cussing.

BOB PLUNKETT had never in all his life hit a woman. Something inside him went cold and sick as he struck Mary's chin with his fist. He caught her as she went limp, and laid her gently down on the ground in the safe black shadows of the brush. Then Bob Plunkett stepped out into the open with the 30-30 saddle carbine and started shooting.

His first shot drew the gunfire away from Hank Peck. The Texan stood there tall and spread-legged, with the carbine shooting as fast as he could lever.

Jay Yount had pulled his horse in behind the squawman and his half-breed son. If Wade hadn't been too drunk, his first shot would have dropped the Texan in his boot tracks. But Wade Gillespie had been swilling down booze enough to make him brave, and he had taken on too much. He caught two 30-30 slugs in his belly, and he died without hearing the Texan's war cry, 'Ay Chihuahua!'

Sheriff Hank Peck shot Floyd Gillespie out of his saddle. It took some luck because the sheriff was shooting left handed. "Pick it up, Plunkett!" Hank Peck hollered before he passed out.

Bob Plunkett and Jay Yount shot it out. A 30-30 slug cut the outer part of the Texan's thigh and staggered him. He dropped down on one knee and shoved fresh cartridges into the saddle gun. Then he squinted along the carbine barrel and pulled the trigger.

Yount stiffened in the saddle. His two quick shots whined close to the Texan's head. Yount's horse spooked, lunging in the water. The gelding whirled and Bob Plunkett got his first good target and he shot three times as fast as he could lever cartridges into the breech. Jay Yount slumped over head first into the shallow muddy water.

The riderless horses lunged and splashed ashore at the Bull Island Crossing on the Missouri River. Three men lay bullet riddled and dead in the shallow water.

Then Bob Plunkett turned and walked back to where he had left the girl. She was getting to her feet when the Texan dropped his carbine and took her into his arms.

"Not that I give a damn," he talked against the quivering of her lips, "if you killed that squawman or a corral full like him. But I couldn't take the risk of you bein' hit by a bullet."

"So you just up and whopped a lady on the jaw. And that's the kind of a gentleman I've got myself promised to marry. My jaw is numb. I sat here and tried to steady my eyes while I watched you stand out there like a darned hero. Hold me closer, Bob. I'm cold inside. I want you to hold me like this and never let go."

"That danged squawman got ary likker in his place," sounded the voice of Sheriff Hank Peck, "that's fit for a man to drink?"

Hank wouldn't let Bob help him on to the cabin. "When I fall over," Hank said crankily, "it'll be time enough to help me. By grab, you act like I was an old man. . . . How you two makin' out?"

Bob Plunkett said: "Goin' to get married, Sheriff—as quick as we locate a parson. Now how'd you git here?"

"Come up the river. Bin camped down a few miles, keepin' an eye on Bull Island Crossin'."

Forsyth was coming alive when they reached the saloon. Mary lit the lamp, and went to work on the sheriff's wounded arm. Then she saw the blood on Bob's thigh. Bob said it was just a nick.

They heard shouting from the north bank. It was the Mashed O roundup crew. Bob Plunkett let Mary tie the bandage around his bullet rip and then he hobbled out to relay Forsyth's message.

"Tell the Mashed O cow chaps," said the Duke, "that any man who don't want to work under the new Mashed O ramrod Bob Plunkett, can ride off the range on the horse he's on. Those who can take orders from you from here on are welcome to come over. The drinks are on the Figure Eight, compliments of the late Floyd Gillespie, squawman and blackguard."

All the Mashed O cowpunchers came across. They hauled the three dead men from the water, dug graves and buried them. One man went to town for the doc.

"Fetch a sky pilot back with you," said Bob Plunkett, grinning.

"Sky pilot?" Forsyth was puzzled.

"Parson, preacher—a marryin' minister," Bob said. "I reckon I stole your girl, Duke."

The Britisher laughed. It was a hearty, chuckling laugh. He said he had a fiancee in England, and she was getting impatient.

"Waitin' for me to finish sowin' a crop of ruddy wild oats. She's a jolly sort. You'll like her. We'll be showin' up next June on our bally honeymoon."

Mary had known about the girl in England all along. Forsyth had, one night when he had drunk too much of the squawman's rotgut, described his English fiancee in glowing terms.

Forsyth explained: "When I told the wretched squawman and the swaggerin' Yount I hoped to make Marie the future Lady Forsyth, it stopped 'em both in their bloody tracks. Floyd Gillespie sold Yount out. And Yount hired Moccasin Tracks to do a spot of murder on my person. Rummy sort of go, eh? I'm dashed sorry I wasn't in on the kill. But I doubt if the Wild West role would be looked upon with entire and heartfelt approval, at home. . . . I've come into the boresome title, you know. Been delayin' the return to old England until the day I could sail home with some sort of gallant record to prove I'd outgrown certain traits that caused frowns in the ranks of the ruddy peers, as it were."

Bob Plunkett from Texas was the new general manager and ramrod of the Mashed O and Figure 8 outfits that were now combined. The cash for the Figure 8 was found in the thick money belt buckled around Floyd Gillespie's broad middle.

It came to a lot of money. Duke Forsyth made Mary and Bob accept it for their wedding present.

The wedding took place at Bull Island Crossing. Then the Britisher and Sheriff Hank Peck drove to town together in the doctor's buckboard.

The big Britisher shook hands with the bridegroom and kissed the bride. There was a mistiness in his bright blue eyes when he looked back on the cow country he was leaving. He promised to fetch his bride to the Mashed O headquarters ranch on their honeymoon.

Sheriff Hank Peck dug around in his pockets till he found a nickel-plated Stock Inspector's badge. He grinned sheepishly.

"I plumb forgot to give you your law badge when you taken the job," he told Bob Plunkett. "But you seem to have worried along somehow without it."

Sheriff Hank Peck winked at the bride and shoved the badge in his pocket and told Doc to hit the rocks easy on the road home.

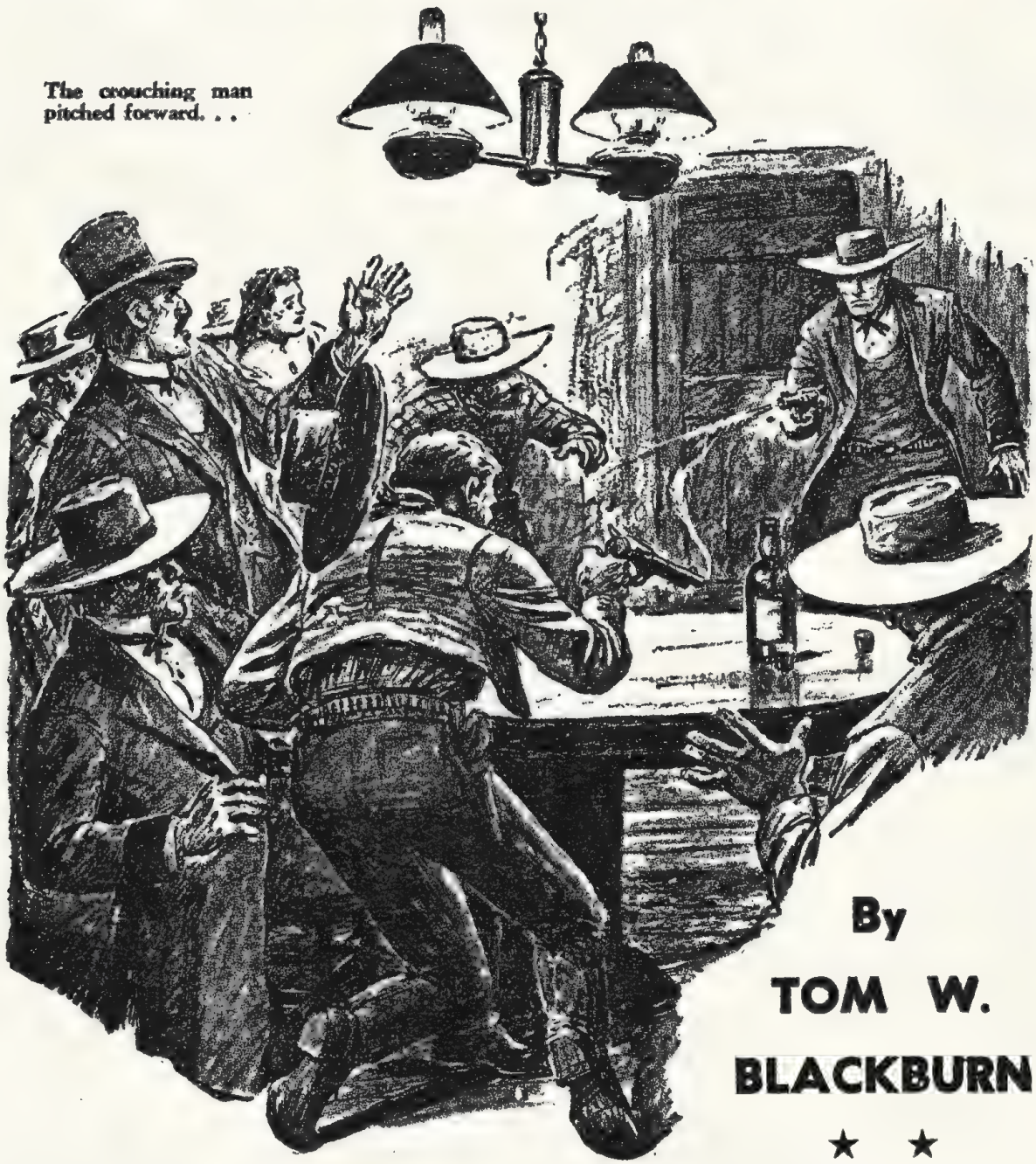
Bob Plunkett took his bride to Texas for their wedding trip. He wanted her to see the country he'd come from, he said.

"But mainly," he told his bride, "to prove I ain't a liar when I tell them kinfolks and friends of mine down in Texas that I married the best-looking girl on earth."

THE END

Faced with a roomful of the most notorious gunslicks in wild San Francisco, Juan Poker had to match killer guns with a lesson in—

GUNSMOKE GENEROSITY



The crouching man pitched forward. . .

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

★ ★

LONG JOHN POKER was not a man who was given to hallucinations, nor was he easily surprised. From San Gorgonio Pass to the Russian River, through most of the length of California, many tales were told of him. He was a Yankee, turned native. He was a brigand, a night rider. He was a sainted friend of the poor and the unfortunate. He was nothing but a legend, a ghost, a man who existed only in fancy and imagination. But wherever his name was mentioned, there was agreement in one thing. His was a level head, proof against alcohol, intimida-

tion, and every kind of sudden violence.

Thus it was that Juan Poker paused on Montgomery Street in raw new San Francisco, midway between the dubious attractions of the Sierra Bull and the Red Spigot, and stared curiously at the figure barring his way along the walk. The figure spoke:

"The peace of God be upon you, friend. Would you succor a man in dire trouble?"

Poker frowned. It was no reflection upon the splendid work the Franciscan order had accomplished in California that its members were not often seen on the streets of the city which bore the name of their patron. It was, in the first place, a city raised by Yankees, pausing in the feverish hunt for Sierra gold. There were many solid people in California, Yankees and natives alike, who did not believe the City of St. Francis had either worth or permanence.

Secondly, the numbers of Franciscans were small and the work before them staggering. Their organization was keyed to the magnificent chain of missions they had erected and their labors were best suited to the small communities of the back country. They were not equipped to serve a city.

As a consequence, it was a startling thing to find a member of the order on the walk before the worst festerings of the pustulence which was the city's Whiskey Row—and in the middle of the night.

Poker eyed the friar before him carefully. The lawless wore many guises on Montgomery Street and each day discovered some new and clever way in which one man could relieve another of his valuables and often his life. However, the friar seemed genuine enough. He wore his robe with humility. His manner was gentle. He seemed desperately sincere. Poker nodded.

"Then, if you'll follow me—?"

The friar turned on his heel and cut up a narrow, muddy alley leading back into the welter of impromptu shacks and hovels which had sprung up back of the waterfront as the city's congestion increased.

Walking on the balls of his feet, Poker followed him. Two or three hundred yards in from the street, the friar turned in under a low roof, closed the door behind him, and touched a candle aflame. The uncertain light revealed a room of the meanist kind. The one show of affluence was the friar's carefully kept port-manteau. The light also revealed a wide, almost beardless face, washed blue eyes, and a gravely sober mouth. Poker thought the man's body was peculiarly bulky.

"I will explain as rapidly as possible, Senor," the friar said. "I have tried to battle alone, but the forces opposed to me are strong. I was fortunate, indeed, that you paused to hear my plea, out on the walk. We will begin thus—" He paused and leaned toward Poker, "You wear a gun. You are therefore familiar with violence. Suppose, in the course of some business, injury was done to you—a great knife wound or a bullet hole in your body. You despair your life. What hope would you have?"

"Here?" Poker grunted bluntly. "That'd I'd be lucky enough to be carried into a house where someone understood a little medicine, a place that was clean and quiet instead of a place like this."

"And if you were not lucky enough to be carried into such a place—what then?"

Poker shrugged.

"You know the answer. An open wound in this country, even with what care a man can usually get, is practically a sure ticket to the Big Gates."

"Exactly," the friar agreed. "But suppose there was in this iniquitous city a house where men of medicine were always at hand—a house where all the rooms were clean and there were soft, skilled hands about, ready to tend to wounds and sickness. Suppose the doors of this house were always open, that no questions were asked of any who entered, that the race and color and creed of a man and the contents of his pocket were of no concern—only that he needed help. Would the existence of such a house be worth a little risk on your part?"

"A hospital would be worth a great deal of risk," Poker said quietly, "If it were more than just an idea in a well-meaning man's head."

"Would I stop a stranger on the street to ask for help in the salvation of merely an idea?" the friar asked.

"I don't know," Poker answered. "Why did you stop me when there were hundreds of men moving along that walk in an hour?"

The friar smiled.

"Because there is not one man in a hun-

dred—not one man in all of California—who is the equal of Juan Poker at the kind of work I require."

Poker let the air from his chest with a sibilant sound.

"Then you recognized me?"

The friar nodded.

"I heard you had come into the city as you occasionally do for a change of air and the familiar charms of Yankee pleasures. I have been watching for three days. But I did not dare mention your name on the walks. There might be those who would overhear me."

THE friar bent, unstrapped his portmanteau, and brought out a roll of sketches. They showed an ambitious building, set in a garden park. Poker saw they were complete construction sketches, ready for the hands of builders.

"It has been nearly a life's work to plan this," the friar said. "Many brothers have had a share in the dreaming and the labors. Money is not plentiful, and it took much time to collect a sufficient sum. I was chosen to bring the plans and the money here. It is fancied at my mission that I am a shrewd man at business. I shared that fancy. But now I realize I am but a babe in the hands of the men of this city!"

The friar shook his head wearily.

"A John Cragar agreed to furnish lumber and erect the timber work at the price I offered. A Jose Olivera agreed to make the bricks and raise the masonry. Both required a portion of their fee in advance. When I paid them this, they stalled for endless days. When I took them to task for the delay, they told me the price of materials and labor had risen so sharply that the final cost would be twice what they agreed and they demanded new contracts. When I refused them, thugs set upon me in the darkness and removed my money belts. After three weeks in San Francisco, this roll of sketches is all that remains of many years work and our hopes for a hospital here."

"So you turn to me for help," Poker murmured. "A sort of 'fighting fire with fire' thing, eh? Is it customary for members of your order to turn to the devil for assistance?"

"You misunderstand!" the friar corrected swiftly. "Perhaps you could bring revenge, but that is not what I wish. It is that you are a man of stature, to whom even such rascals as John Cragar and Jose Olivera would listen. And it is my belief that there is good in every man. If these two could be made to see what a great good my hospital would be in this city, certainly they would forget the matter of their own profits and put such money as I have paid them, together with what they had stolen from me, to the work for which it was intended."

Poker laughed shortly.

"You don't know San Francisco!" he said. "I don't know this pair, but I've known others like them. Talk is the last thing to which thev'll listen."

The friar sank heavily onto a packing-box stool.

"Then I am not to see my hospital built? I am to return to my mission in disgrace and dejection, a failure?"

"No, not necessarily," Poker said quietly. "It's just that you're trying to go at it the wrong way, now. Get hold of Cragar and Olivera. Tell them you've inquired and discovered that the cost of building has risen. Tell them that some of your money was stolen, but that you've sent for more, which will be here shortly. Tell them you want them to go ahead. And to make it convincing, give them a little more cash. I have a couple of bills I could spare for a while—"

The friar reached under his cassock and brought out a money belt.

"That won't be necessary. This belt was hidden here when I was set upon. It contains funds for outfitting and expenses. I could use a portion of it—if you are sure your plan will work."

"I'm sure of nothing," Poker answered. "But I've had fair luck before at guessing which way a snake will wiggle next."

The friar smiled faintly.

"Yes, I have heard a time or two of such guesses—" he murmured. "And when I have taken this message to Cragar and Olivera, I rejoin you?"

"No, I won't be here. Just keep an eye on the piece of land where you expect to put up your building. If I'm successful, there should shortly be some action there. If I fail, you'd better get on back to your mission. There will be nothing more you can do."

Rising, Poker opened the door and stepped out into the night.

* * *

It was not difficult to get a line on John Cragar and Joe Olivera. Poker found ample gossip of them in the lower part of the city. They appeared to be a shrewd pair of operators, capitalizing for the most part on the rapidly fluctuating real-estate and building material markets in San Francisco. Some of their deals were common gossip along the street and in bars—boastful gossip repeated with enjoyment. Poker found that the Red Spigot, near which the friar had accosted him, served generally as headquarters for the rascally builders. With this information secured, he returned to his own quarters farther into the town.

He slept well, ate well, and waited restlessly until nearly sundown of the following day. As twilight came down over the streets, he drifted toward the Red Spigot.

For the peace of mind of the troubled friar and so that the man in the cassock would play his part with convincing assurance, Poker had been confident of manner in outlining the friar's part of his plan to him. But the confidence had been assumed, in part, at least. Poker's plan was relatively simple. It was based chiefly on a characteristic common to most men who made a living in swindling others—a pride in their accomplishments. He had felt relief to discover that many of Cragar's and Olivera's previous schemes were well known on the street. If they talked once, they might talk again. And it was necessary for them to do so if his plan was to succeed.

WALKING past the Red Spigot, he studied the place, but could see no sign of unusual activity. He scowled. Going up the street a block further, he turned back down. Midway through this return trip, three men came out onto the walk before him. He saw the building they quitted advertised a notary on a dingy window. And he recognized one of the figures as that of the friar who had accosted him the night before. He grinned suddenly.

The other two, a tall, lank Yankee and a thin Californio nearly as tall, must be Cragar and Olivera. And he thought he understood. The friar had been willing to accept his suggestions, but a personal uneasiness had made the man in the robe haul the two contractors before a notary in order to have a witness when he paid them the money this time. A harmless precaution, as far as Poker's plan went, and one likely to give the friar a good deal of satisfaction.

The friar came up the street toward Poker. The other two men angled down across the track toward the door of the Red Spigot. Poker backed into a deep doorway and let the engrossed friar pass him, then stepped out and followed Cragar and Olivera.

It was by this time well into the evening drinking hour, and Poker entered the saloon without drawing any interest. He stepped to the bar and bought a drink with a small coin. He located Cragar and Olivera at a table toward the back of the room. Men were separating themselves from the general crowd and drifting down toward this table. Both men in the chairs seemed in high spirits. There was much laughter, in which those beginning to gather around occasionally joined. After a little, Cragar and Olivera rose and went out through a door in the rear wall, which Poker judged led to a private room behind the main bar. One of those who had gathered about them remained at this door, apparently selecting those who were to pass through it.

In the course of ten minutes, something over a dozen of the most knowing and unprincipled-looking men in the Red Spigot had gone into this back room. Orders for drinks began to come out, and the proprietor had to put a second man behind the bar to keep them filled and carried into the back room. Poker ordered another drink and continued to wait patiently, carefully measuring the sounds of revelry which began to come from behind the door. After another half hour, three musicians were brought in off the street, and a little later—after a man from the back room had held a hurried conference with the proprietor—two dancers in tawdry costumes came down the stairs from an upper floor and also entered the back room.

Poker watched the trays of drinks going through the rear door and made estimates as shrewdly as an engineer measuring the earth going into a dam across a river. At the end of three hours, he straightened at the bar and drifted down it's length. The racket from the rear room was at a high level. Three or four hangers-on who had not been admitted idled about, throwing en-

vious glances toward the closed panel. Poker sidled near one of these, let the fellow smell the whiskey on his own breath, and asked a question.

"A wedding or a wake?"

The idler glanced at him curiously, saw nothing to arouse suspicion, and shrugged.

"Cragar and 'Dobe Olivera just made another cleaning. Some preacher-feller they clipped last week. Got him good, I reckon. But I don't know why they should be so high and mighty, by hell. When Three-Fingered Jack was down last month with a pocket full of pilgrim cash, he put on a real spread—with no picking and choosing, either, and nobody at the door to say who was in on it and who wasn't. Took over the whole Spigot for two nights and a day. A better show than this, by thunder!"

"Just cronies get a ticket to this, eh?" Poker suggested.

The idler nodded sourly.

"The whole damned outfit that works with Olivera and Cragar when there's need. All the big boys on the back streets. Lumber profiteers, carpenter-gang bosses, the rest of them that are holding building prices to the top of the ladder. I hope that free rotgut poisons the lot of them!"

Muttering sullenly, the idler moved away. Juan Poker grinned broadly. It took curious bait to catch curly wolves. Another thought struck him and he chuckled. Before now he had forced restitution of stolen goods and stolen money. Before now he had been able to crowd a man back within the confines of law and justice. But this time he was going further. This time a body of the citizens of San Francisco were going to back a civic enterprise. The guileless, troubled, earnest friar who had dreamed of something of value to the City of St. Francis would see his dream materialize in greater glory than he had planned.

Watching his time, Poker drifted on to stand near the man watching the rear doorway. The fellow's eyes were following the extra barkeeper as he shuttled back and forth between his racked bottles and the rear room. Poker spoke casually to him.

"Drew the short end of the stick, didn't you? You got a drink coming. Go get it. I'll stand the door—"

The fellow glanced at him, apparently saw nothing to cause alarm, and nodded gratefully.

"A couple of shots would go good—"

He turned and moved up the bar to a vacant place. Poker waited patiently until the man had downed one drink and was well into his second. There was every indication that his thirst was growing and he would remain at the bar for some time. Having made sure of this, Poker silently opened the door at his back and slid through it. The inner room, littered with tables ordinarily used for high stake poker and certain other games best not conducted in public, was filled with men. Tobacco smoke hung heavily in the air. A half a dozen conversations were running at once. John Cragar and Jose Olivera were at opposite ends of the room, each expansively playing the host. The balance of the crowd were fawning on them, making much of their boldness and skill. And the preoccupation was such that Poker's quiet entry was not noted.

A LARGE key hung in the lock on the inner side of the door. Poker turned this when he had silently closed the panel. Pocketing the key, he began a quiet unobtrusive drift across the room toward the one other door, set in the back wall. He reached

it without drawing attention, but as he turned the key also dangling there, a man beside him grunted sharply.

"What the hell you doing?"

Poker snapped the lock on closed, dropped the key into his pocket, and turned to face the fellow.

"Locking the door," he answered blandly. "Somebody was trying to slide in."

The man blinked as though in satisfaction, started to turn away, then whipped back suddenly.

"I didn't hear nobody!" he snapped. "And I don't think I know you! Hey, Jack—this jigger belong?"

Talk died abruptly in the room. Heads swivelled toward Poker. Jack Cragar, his thin face flushed, peered narrowly down the room. Olivera, a little closer, began to swear luridly in Spanish.

"Gentlemen!" Poker murmured in a chiding tone. "I did not mean to interrupt your amusements. It was merely that I understood the influential men of San Francisco were gathered here and I have brought you all an opportunity."

Cragar swung down the room.

"Opportunity?" he asked ominously. "There's been a boy or two wanted a slice of our trade in this town. They started in like you're starting. They didn't get far!"

Poker smiled nastily.

"A slice of your trade?" he asked. "No. I'm afraid I'm not equipped for that kind of business. You boys keep your trade—and welcome to it!"

"Then what is your business, Yankee?" Olivera growled. "Spit it out!"

Poker shrugged.

"My business is my own. My name is Juan Poker. Perhaps you have heard of me—?"

Abrupt silence came over the room. Poker could clearly hear the quickened breathing of those nearest to him. He turned smoothly, taking a backward step, until his back was flattened against the wall and the whole room was visible at once. He supposed there was humor in this. These were dangerous men. Probably no more dangerous a group existed in San Francisco. Not that they were a sandy lot. It took no sand to clip the helpless and the uninformed. The danger in them lay in their shiftiness.

But dangerous as they were, mention of a man's name held them all in check. Mention of a man's name turned the hard glitter of fear up high in their eyes. It was strange that a man could have luck and have that luck run through the exaggeration of many tongues into legend, each fresh tale pyramiding upon the one before, until he could do the incredible and the impossible simply because legend said that he could and men believed it.

Jose Olivera broke the silence.

"The friar, then—" he breathed, and he crossed himself with a ludicrous piety.

Poker nodded.

"Yes, the friar," he agreed gently. "It appears you all are celebrating a success. A man should pass his success on to others, and who needs help more than the friars? San Francisco needs a hospital, too. If it doesn't now—if you boys don't kick through with a little contribution—the contents of your pockets, say—there's going to be a big need for a hospital. I aim to make some of you into customers."

Faces tightened. Anger came up in many eyes. Some faces shifted surreptiously toward a small, crouching man a little to one side of John Cragar. Poker understood. This was the whirlwind of the crew. This was the ace reserved for the tight spots. Poker had not touched his own weapon, hoping the impact of his sudden appearance and his identity might check violence. He saw the hope was in vain. This man thought he was good. So did the others. Good enough to match the legendary speed of Juan Poker.

Poker watched the man closely, without letting it appear that his eyes were upon the fellow at all. Tension built up to a singing-wire level, strained beyond endurance, yet refusing to snap. With his attention apparently on Cragar and Jose Olivera, now standing close together, Poker spoke softly:

"Well—?"

It happened, then. Men swung aside, clearing a sudden path up the room. The crouching man dropped a hand with sure and certain ease toward the gun holstered on his thigh. It was very sure, very competent, very fast. Artistry. Poker recognized it. He recognized fact, also. The crouching man was faster than Long John Poker. There was one chance. Speed was not all that was necessary when men fought with guns.

As Poker made his own draw, he leaped aside—something no traditional gun man would do because it changed his balance at the critical moment and risked spoiling the accuracy of a snap shot. The crouching man's gun roared. Fire brushed Poker's upper arm. Poker's leap ended with his shoulders against the locked back door. Braced there, he flung two shots across the room—one at the crouching man and one at another who had begun a sneaking draw.

The crouching man bent closer to the floor, then pitched forward onto it. The second man yelped sharply and dropped his weapon. Blood began to drip from the fingers of his gun hand. Poker's eyes leaped across the faces of the others.

"Are there any more fools in the house?" he asked quietly.

No one moved. Palming the key from the back door and sliding it into the lock behind him, he spoke loudly, covering the move.

"I was sure you'd listen to reason. To save time, I'll take your contributions. Cragar and *Senor* Olivera first, since they are hosts. And be generous, Gentlemen—"

HE TIPPED his head at a little table nearly in front of him. Cragar was slow in moving. Poker slanted the muzzle of his pistol at him and the tall man moved abruptly. He emptied a pocket. It disgorged only a small heap of currency. The gun moved suggestively again. With an oath, Cragar reached into an inner pocket and commenced to heap a small fortune on the table.

"You'll not get away with this, Poker," he said as he backed away.

"Your reluctance is not becoming, Cragar," Poker answered easily. "And now your partner—"

Olivera's pockets also produced a sizeable sum. He stepped back. The others, knowing that Poker had yet to get out of this room and unaware that he had quietly unlocked the door behind him again, came forward with a show of willingness which did its best to be misleading. Poker eyed the growing heap of currency on the table. For a fact, John Cragar and Olivera moved in a well-heeled company. A sizeable fortune piled up there. Poker began to be concerned over how he was to carry it. He saw a discarded jacket thrown across a chair. Motioning to a near man, he ordered the fellow to tie the currency into this.

The fellow moved obediently, wrapped the coin and paper securely in the jacket, and tied the sleeves about it for additional security. The eyes of the whole company left this process when it was completed and swung back to Poker. This was the pressure point; this was the place where the break had to come—fast and sure. Poker nodded satisfaction and forced his voice to a level, easy tone.

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"Gentlemen, I thank you," he said. "This is generous; this is a fine contribution. The friar will be pleased. I leave you, now. May I hope that you all will one day or another be patients in the friar's hospital, which you have so enthusiastically supported tonight!"

With the last word, Poker swung suddenly forward. At the same time, he tipped his gun up and took out the double lamp hanging from the center of the ceiling with a swift pair of shots. With his left hand, he caught the bundle of money and tossed it across the room as close to the locked door leading to the front of the Red Spigot as he could in the darkness. Reversing himself, he doubled to the unlocked rear door, jerked it open, and flung himself out flat on the floor of the room, a yard to one side of the door. This was rapid work—split-second timing.

With his shots at the lamps, guns unlimbered and spoke. Death passed close to him, and a man somewhere shouted in hurt protest as a slug took the wrong victim. There was a loud shout when someone discovered the money was gone from the table, and a louder roar when the back door slatted open. Guns fired again. Poker, flat along the baseboard to one side of the door, heard lead tear at the open casement. Men piled toward the doorway, jamming themselves in their hurry to get through the opening.

In short moments, it was all over and the room was empty. Somewhere in the distance, apparently either way along the alley running behind the Red Spigot, men were still shouting. But none was close at hand. Chuckling silently, Poker rose to his feet, located the bundle of money against the wall across the room, and unlocked the door leading into the saloon.

When he swung the door open, the gateman whom he had relieved faced Poker. Reeling as though he was slightly stunned and clutching the jacket holding the collection he had taken up for the friar's hospital as though it was his own, Poker staggered out. The gateman caught his arm.

"What the hell happened in there? Where's Jack and Jose and the boys?"

"Gent jumped us," Poker mumbled. "Claimed he was Juan Poker. The boys smoked him out and chased him off up the alley. But the dirty son got me—"

He shook his head dazedly. The gateman pushed passed him, ran across the back room, and plunged out into the night. Two or three others followed him. Poker reeled on across the Red Spigot's outer room, breasted the front door, and stepped out into the street. Abandoning his appearance of dazedness, he started briskly up the street, keeping to shadows. Midway up the block, he came on a stocky figure in a cassock, kneeling on the dusty walk.

The friar scrambled to his feet.

"I'll believe any story of Juan Poker I ever hear from now on!" he breathed. "When I heard the shooting begin in that den of iniquity, I was certain the number of your days had come. I shall give thanks for your escape!"

"Give thanks for this, too," Poker said drily, shoving the jacket full of money into the friar's arms. "And get moving, before those fools realize I couldn't have gotten out that back door and they start searching the street. Your hospital's there—together with enough over to get you supplies and doctors and what else you'll need."

"You're leaving me, now?" the friar said.

"On a dead run!" Poker agreed. "I'll be a prime target in San Francisco for months to come, after tonight. But I'll give you a good steer. Get uptown with that money as fast as you can go. There's a man by the name of Leland Stanford has a store up there. A sound man and a big one—big enough to back down tinhorns like Olivera and Cragar. Give Mr. Sanford your money and tell him what you want to do. Tell him I sent you. He'll see your money goes for a hospital and you get the best."

Gratitude ran high in the friar.

"I had thought to call the name St. Francis de Assisi," he mumbled. "But I would change that to Juan—"

"You do and you'll never have a patient!" Poker promised grimly. "Put my name on the donor's plaque if you have to do something—and don't forget Cragar and Olivera when you're having the plaque engraved—"

He turned and started abruptly off in the other direction. The friar called after him, promising him haven, should he ever chance by the home mission. Poker did not hear it all. More than once Franciscan brothers had nursed him through a festering session with a gunshot wound or a bout with fever. As against the debt he owed them in his own name and in the interests of the nameless and the poor, he had done little.

A LITTLE LESS LAW, PLEASE!

"You old fool!" Jimmy growled at me.

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

★ ★

When old Cap Follis sold a top horse for only thirty dollars to young Jimmy, Cap figured he had squared a ticklish debt with the rascally wrangler.

I WAS only tryin' to give the kid a break, and he didn't have no call to take offense that-a-way. Folks had been waitin' for my big Double-Y sale for a long time, and I had hoss-buyers from all over Idyho, and Wyoming and Montana and Arizony and California as well.

And here's this kid, every time a hoss is put up, a-singin' out, "Thutty dollars!" He opened every bid, and that was his only bid. You just knowed thutty was all he had. He was back in the crowd, so I couldn't see him. A feller was there biddin' on every hoss from right up in front, and talkin' free about the Canadian Mounties, and if folks thought he was buyin' for the Mounties, and that every hoss I had was

fitten for the Mounties—why, I couldn't he'p it, could I?

Or could I? I'll never tell! I ben in this hoss business a long time, and I didn't accumerlate the Double-Y, the Idyho National Stockmen's Bank, and sich-like traps, by not knowin' better than to drap my bread butter-side-down.

So you can just figger how folks tuk on when this kid would sing out, "Thutty dollars," can't you? Got so they'd wait when a hoss was brung out, until the kid would haul off and bid, and they they'd whoop and holler. Most of them hosses was shadin' a hundred and sixty, and it was plumb funny.

But there oncet was a time when thutty dollars was a sight of money to *me,* too, and there oncet was a time when a old coot with plenty of money gave *me* a chancet, too. So I moseyed up to the platform where Colonel Higgs was cryin' the sale.

"Who's biddin' that thutty-dollar bid?" I whispered. "Cain't make him out in the crowd. Eyes ain't so good no more."

"It's that young Jimmy Demler," says the Colonel. "Must be tryin' to ruin the sale. He's sore at you for firin' him."

"No," I says. "He just wants a hoss."

You see, I had knowed old Jim Demler in the old days, when him and me fracased around the country quite considerable together, with me gettin' us into trouble and steady old Jim gettin' us out. Like the time I cut the Spanish man in Laredo with a bullwhip, and Jim, he fogged us out with his forty-five, and—but that's plumb ancient history.

So when old Jim hauled off and died, he up and sent young Jimmy up to me, seein' as how things had prospered in Idyho for me, whilst they went from bad to wuss for Jim in Texas. And young Jimmy, though he wore his pappy's old gun and practiced it fit to give me the creeps, was a right smart of a hand. Yes, you wouldn't want no better man than Jimmy Demler.

But then he got to hangin' around my girl, Nettie, and I had it all planned for Nettie to go East and get herself some schoolin' first, so I kind of fired Jimmy. And, as he was leavin', I sort of told him not to show his red head on the Double-Y until he could hold up his poke and cast a shadder with it.

"Oh!" he says. "I'm not good enough for a Follis, I reckon."

"Jimmy," says I, "good or bad ain't my kind of words. I leave that to the Law to decide. I just say don't hang around here no more, or I'm a-goin' to whistle me up some law."

"There could be," says Jimmy, "a little less law, and suit me. Too civilized here. Galds me. All right, Cap Follis. No Demler ever coaxed to be welcome. To aitch with you."

Afterwards, I felt sorry—because he was old Jim Demler's son, seed of the old cuss that had saved my skin more than oncet, and because he was right smart of a good man with my blooded hosses.

So I whispers in Colonel Higgs' ear, sayin', "All right, now I'm goin' to have 'em bring up that bay mare, Trilby. Kid helped break her when he worked for me, and he just about would die to own her. When he sings out thutty dollars, you knock the mare down to him."

"Cap," said the Colonel, horrified, "that mare will bring two-fifty if she'll bring a dime. You cain't—"

"Thutty dollars," says I, gettin' down off the platform, "is what she'll bring. You heered me!"

I had the boys lead Trilby in next. She was a four-year-old bay, out of a twelve-hundred dollar Kentucky stud I shipped out, and her mammy was a buckskin that had half hot blood in her too. I see the crowd stir a little, and I heered 'em gasp, because there just wasn't mares like this Trilby runnin' around Idyho any place you look.

Thinks I to myself, *this squares us, Jimmy Demler.* See, it was the only way I knowed how to say I was sorry.

"What am I offered for this beautiful critter?" chants Colonel Higgs, goin' into his spiel beautiful, just as though he didn't know what the sale would fetch.

"Thutty dollars!" comes a shrill, nervous voice from back in the crowd.

"Sold!" yells the Colonel, bringin' down his hammer. But there was a pained look on his face, I can tell you. "Sold to the sorrel-top gentleman in the patched pants, for thutty dollars. Fetch on the next hoss, boys, and let's live this down quick."

The crowd lets out a yell of disappointment, because there was a passel of moneyed

buyers there that was slobberin' all over theyselves to bid on that Trilby mare, but she was a sold hoss—and they knew it! I see Jimmy comin' through the crowd with a stunned look on his face, like he'd been bopped with a feed-sack full of hoss-shoes. I stayed to see them put the mare's halter in his hand, and then I fogged out of there.

"Now, maybe Nettie will speak to me again," says I to myself. "Plumb tired of havin' my own daughter ice-faced at me. Need that ornery boy to he'p me break out them two-year-olds, anyway."

THE sale was all over and we was countin' the money back in the office when I heered a knock at the door. The feller that had been biddin' "for the Mounties" looked up kind of nervous. I gave him ten ten-dollar bills and said go out the winder, and thanks. He did, and caught the next stage out, before folks would get to thinkin' it over and realize that he had bid a sight and bought nothin' at all.

Then I opened the door, and here's Jimmy Demler, leadin' Trilby by the halter. He had a good saddle and bridle, I knowed—a rig he'd won ridin' to fairs here and there. I wondered why they wasn't on the mare.

"Hello, Jimmy," says I. "See you bought yourself one of my hosses. Hope you feel you didn't get stang at the price."

He puts the halter rope in my hand and spits on the ground between us, and his freckles stuck out all over his white face. I seen his ornery old daddy get that white look many's the time, and then proddin' was poison.

"You had your fun, Cap," says Jimmy, "but there ain't no Demler takin' charity, as I reckon you know. I bought the hoss—yes! But I priced her around, and I was offered two-eighty for her, and that's what I'm goin' to pay you. Thutty dollars down you got, and two-fifty I owe you. Keep the mare till I pay it off."

"Now, Jimmy—" I starts to say.

"Demlers don't take charity," says he, "and besides, you made me a laughin' stock tryin' to *give* me a hoss right in front of folks that-a-way. You keep this mare till I pay her off."

"Where," says I, not realizin' it was exactly the wrong thing to say, "are you goin' to get two hunnert and fifty dollars, boy?"

He hitched up his pants and spit on the ground again and got red under his freckles and said, "Won't nobody give it to me charity, guarantee you *that,* Cap Follis! And thank you not to stick your nose in my business no more. I don't ask *you* where *your* money comes from."

He walks off, and Trilby, who knowed him well, looks after him and whickers. He didn't look back. His old man was half hoss, too, and I just knowed how it wrang him out to walk off that way and leave the mare.

My boys was all spread out over town, carousin' and what not, except Tom Slaymaker, my foreman. He's steady, if he ain't bright. I put Trilby in the shed and told Tom to round up the boys one at a time, and have them keep an eye on Jimmy. I felt responsible. After all, old Jim had shipped him up to me to ride herd on.

And the town was full of money, and strangers were bunkin' four-deep in the hotel, and sleepin' on pool-tables, and everything else. When I sells hosses, they comes from miles around! When the Double-Y advertises its annual sale, why, folks start gettin' ready for the biggest day of the year in my part.

Pretty soon Tom comes back and says the boys are all warned to stay sober enough to watch for Jimmy, at least, although three-four of them have been ruckusin' already and have only one good eye left to watch for him with. Kind of ornery, my boys. Like 'em that-a-way. Was a little ornery myself, thutty years ago.

About dark, couple of the boys come to me and says Jimmy is hangin' around the Metropolitan saloon. Sober, they says. Not drinkin' any. Just lookin' around. Sittin' in the corner mostly.

"Gun on?" says I.

"Gun on," says they. "Kind of tetchy humor, too. Asked him to sip a rotgut with me, and he says he's feudin' with the Double-Y, thanks just the same, and will drink when he's squared it up."

"Oh-oh!" says I.

"Want him tooken care of?" says my boys, eager. "We'd just love to stampede the Metropolitan. Fun! Shanghai him out of there in no time. Want him beat up, or

what, or are you on his side? Anything you want, Cap. Be purely fun for us. For him or ag'in him. Say the word."

"The word is this—stay out of the Metropolitan," I warn them. "But if you peek through the winder now and then, I'd 'preciate knowin' if Jimmy's there."

They peeked through the winder now and then. About midnight Jimmy is still there, and I been settin' in the office of the sale-barn so long it's gettin on my nerves. I didn't get along with Foxy Baraw, that runs the Metropolitan, any too well. Didn't know how he'd taken it when I walked in, but that's what I did. Walked right in.

Foxy was a one-armed man, that folks said got his arm cut off by some wild boys down in the California goldfields because they catched him dealing from the bottom of the deck. He couldn't play no more cards himself, not unless he wanted to play honest anyhow, and Foxy wasn't the man to play that-a-way. There was always a tinhorn or two hangin' around his place, and I had the idee he set up the suckers and the tinhorns split with him.

Sale times, his place was always headquarters for the scum that come in, and I made it a practice to warn honest buyers that came to my sale to stay away from the Metropolitan. That didn't set me up with Foxy any, you can bet. But there's always a stockman or two, or a horse-broker or two, that can't buy all he wants at my sale, and has money left over. He wants a run for it, and he turns up at the Metropolitan, and next day he's got a headache and an empty poke.

At the door of the Metropolitan I met Sheriff Sid Cole and a couple of his deppities.

"How she goin'?" I says to him.

"Don't like the looks of things," says Sid. "Wish you hadn't wished this law job on me, Cap. Ain't goin' to run next time. This is the worst sale spree we ever had. The place is jam-packed, and some of 'em's your friends. Why don't you get 'em out?"

"You know I cain't!" I said. "When a man's been out-bid on a hoss and has got the disappointment and the money burnin' a hole in his pocket, he craves action."

"I'll be in my office," said Sid, "hopin' for the best."

I WENT in the saloon. Foxy was behind the bar, servin' drinks to a packed line with his one arm. He had on a bright blue woodsman's shirt and a big yeller tie, and his black fringe was slicked back around his baldskin head, and his droopin' black mustache had been blacked up, and he was a pure spectacle! All that fixin' up, I always said, was just to take folks' mind off the shifty look in his eyes.

You can just imagine he didn't serve no round on the house to celebrate my entrance. I shoved through to the bar—when you got as much money as I got, folks will kind of make way—and waited. He tuk his time comin', and when he retch me, he laid his arm on the bar and held his stump behind.

"Well—well!" he says. "Who've we got but Cap Follis, State's biggest cattleman, banker, and breeder of blooded horses, in person! The great man has hauled off and gone slummin'."

"Whiskey," I said.

"Please!"

"Whiskey, please," I come back. "Nice crowd you got, Foxy. Three games goin', I see. Anybody gettin' skinned?"

"After they been skinned at your hoss-sale," says Foxy, "they don't mind anything painless like a game of stud." He leaned over and whispered to me as he shoved me my drink, "What do you want in here, Cap?"

I didn't answer. That was all the answer he needed. He straightened up and moseyed down the bar and whispers to a guy out of the corner of his mouth. This guy is one of his flunkies. The flunky goes sidlin' around the room, stoppin' to whisper here and there out of the corner of his mouth. Mostly he whispered to the tinhorns who were settin' in the poker games, but here and there it was some hard-eyed stranger who was just leanin'.

I looked long and hard in that mob for Jimmy Demler, because in spite of his red hair he was like his old man—he could just kind of melt into his surroundin's like a prairie chicken. I seen him at last, and he was leanin' too, and just lookin' on. I felt pretty bad.

"Workin' for Foxy," I said. "He wants that two-fifty bad. Lord, but old Jim would turn over in his grave."

I felt guilty. I moved off through the

crowd, and I seen Jimmy catch sight of me. I let on like I was just lookin' around. But what I wanted was to get a good view of that game Jimmy was watchin'. I knowed how Foxy worked things, you see.

Foxy's way was to plant a tinhorn at every table, and to see the suckers kind of got scattered around. Then he had a character or two standin' guard at each table, so if there was any trouble, the character could help out. Usually it was a sucker squawkin' that he'd been cold-decked. Usually the tinhorn would holler innocent. If the crowd didn't take up the sucker's holler, everything went along all right.

But suppose the tinhorn was a little careless, and it looked like some of the folks standin' around watchin' the game was about to start lynch-talk, then's when the character behind the game would step for'rads. He was usually a stranger, and armed, and when he horned in, folks would take it he was purely disinterested.

"I seen that deal!" he would say, "and it was a straight deal! Pardon me for buttin' in, but I just naturally cain't stand a poor loser." Then he'd turn to the skinned sucker and say firm-like—"If you don't want to play no more, get up and I'll take your seat. Been waitin' for a seat."

See? You can bet Foxy paid well for *that* kind of aid. He paid the tinhorns well, but he paid even better to men that could get the tinhorns out of trouble.

'Twasn't just old Jim Demler I was worryin' over, but my girl Nettie, too. She set a heap of stock by this brat kid, and she hadn't said a cussed word to me. I could cordially have kicked myself all over Idyho. I wished then I'd tooken my boys' advise, and just plain shanghaied Jimmy out.

I aidged over toward the game and didn't let on I knowed Jimmy was one of Foxy's leaners. Then I see Foxy's flunky bresh up and whisper to another feller. He was a short, grinnin' mean little man with a big mole on his nose. Jimmy was leanin' against the wall, and I was between him and the flunky, so he didn't get whispered to.

"Two men on this game!" I think to myself. "Foxy's primed for a killin'. And that's Fuzzy Thompson dealin'."

Fuzzy had been around before, and he was one gambler that was no tinhorn—he was just naturally the best there was! And when I aidged around the table to see who else was playin', I knowed why.

Because settin' there with a big stack of chips and a big poke of bills to buy more with was Bob Wilkerson, a horse-breeder from Grand Island, Nebraska, and my kind of a man. Bob liked to play poker, and he was a good player sober, but he just *would* drink. Said he didn't have no fun playin' less he could drink.

Well, mostly he could afford it, but at my last sale he dropped three thousand dollars in Foxy's Metropolitan. If I was any judge, he had about five thousand in front of him then.

"Not drinkin', though!" I exclaimed. "The fool! He thinks he's goin' to win what he lost last year."

Because when I got a good look at Bob's face, I see he wasn't playin' for fun. He was grim as a starvin' undertaker. The other suckers around the table—an Army hoss-buyer, a local cowman, and a representative in the Territorial Government—didn't count. It was betwixt Bob Wilkerson and Fuzzy Thompson.

I watched a few hands. They played dealer's choice, and every time it come around to Bob, he chose stud. Dynamite.

Because stud was Fuzzy's game. Fuzzy was a little, mild man that wore celluloid collars and had stomach trouble and was always seen with a pile of crackers by his side, because when his stomach got empty, it hurt. That kind of a man skeers me, because when your gut's afire, what's the difference if you do take long chances? Seen men like that that *wanted* to die.

And there was Fuzzy with his crackers about gone, and a little skim of sweat all over his face, and doubled up with a pain in his stomach. And across from him sat big, red-faced Bob Wilkerson, dyin' for a drink the same as Fuzzy was dyin' for crackers. But he wasn't drinkin'.

What Bob was doin' was winnin' money! When Fuzzy dealt, Bob bet; and when others dealt, Bob bet, and when he dealt, he bet, too. But it was a nerve-wrackin', deadly kind of bettin', not wild and reckless plungin'. And it seemed to me that he had Fuzzy's goat.

I moved around the table sayin' " 'Scuse me," when I nudged folks, and they made room because I was Cap Follis. I felt sorry for Bob, I knowed he'd blow up if I said a word. They had him pinched off like a cornered cow. There was young Jimmy Demler standin' behind Fuzzy to his left, and Mole-Nose standin' behind Fuzzy to his right, both of them where they could watch every hand that was dealt.

And—both Jimmy and Mole-Nose were makin' quite sure that their gun-hands was free. Others saw that, too, and took special care not to get in their ways. Jimmy was wearin' old Jim's gun, and he was just about as good with it as old Jim had been, and I tell you that's pretty good. I didn't have to take but one guess about Mole-Nose. Man like that wouldn't earn his salt with a post-hole digger or any honest work, but big money's his for the askin' when his tool is a gun.

I watched a few more hands. Oncet in a while Bob would drop a little, but mostly he won—and it seemed to me it was from Fuzzy Thompson. Twicet I see Foxy's flunkies come over and take a look at the game, and go back and talk to Foxy out of the sides of their mouths, and I see Foxy get sore and try to catch Fuzzy's eye. But Fuzzy was playin' the hardest poker he ever played, and he wasn't catchin' nobody's eye.

I never seen no man have the luck Bob Wilkerson had, cold game or any kind. He played some first-class poker, shiftin' his style, droppin' out a hand or two now and then, bullin' the game next, stallin' after that, checkin' and passin' and then suddenly whopping down a stack of blue chips that would choke a cow.

ABOUT eleven-thirty I sidled over to Jimmy, because I was sweatin' myself from nerves, and tried to talk to him. "Purty fast play," says I, makin' talk.

He didn't answer, but just kept watchin' that game. I guess I got a little too close to his right arm, because he moved back a inch or two to clear it again. He did not lift his eyes. I seen them dart around the table again and again. His freckles stuck out of his white face, and I seen the kid was tight as a fiddle-string.

"I like to watch a good, fast game," I says, makin' more conversation. "But Jimmy, if you'll step outside, I got a proposition—"

"Shut up, Cap," says Jimmy, out of the corner of his mouth, "and make room."

What could I do?

I stepped back, that's what I did, and made room. I jostled Mole-Nose steppin' back. Just then I looked up and catched sight of Foxy Baraw. He was lookin' at Mole-Nose. He nodded, and Mole-Nose turned to me and gave me a push. A deliberate one. Then he stepped on my corns.

"Loafers ain't allowed in here," he says. "If you don't want to play, go outside."

"You come outside yourself," I said, "and I'll wring that mole offen your ugly nose."

Then I thought better of it. Just then I heered a kind of a moan run around the room, and I looked down at the table. They was playin' stud this trip, and Fuzzy was dealin'. But he wasn't takin' no chances gettin' catched on *this* hand. Everybody was out of the game but him and Bob, and the deck was layin' down, and whenever he turned a card, he reached out and got it with a thumb and finger like it was red-hot

Three cards was out. Bob had a heart ace and a spade seven up, and Fuzzy had a diamond ten. There was about eight hundred in the pot, when Fuzzy called. He dealt Bob a club ten and himself a diamond nine, and Bob bet a stack of blue chips, and

the gambler seen him and raised, and another eight-nine hundred went in. This time Bob called. Fuzzy next dealt Bob a seven of diamonds and himself a diamond eight.

"Pair of seven bets these," says Bob.

Fuzzy doubled it. *This,* I says to myself, *is the killin'—here it comes.* Because Fuzzy, I knowed, would turn up another diamond. He would bet like a fool, to make Bob think he was tryin' to bluff him with that bob-tailed straight flush, and when the showdown came it wouldn't be straight, but it would be a flush. And this fancy, deck-down, fingertip deal was to stall off any cold-deck arguments afterward. But I knowed how that slick Fuzzy Thompson could deal!

They went down to their last chip, and Bob shoved in bills, and Fuzzy had to send over to Foxy for more money, and Foxy came over with it himself—a thousand in gold, five hundred in bills. They went in all the way on that, and then Bob looked up and saw me and asked me to stake him. I gave him a blank I.O.U. and he turned it over and kept track of the bets, and then Foxy had to go back and get more money.

Fuzzy had shoved eight thousand dollars into the pot when he must have got Foxy's signal. He called. Bob filled in the I.O.U. for eight thousand and shoved it into the pot and they turned their cards over. I like to fainted.

Bob had the ace of spades in the hole, and Fuzzy had the queen of spades! They had been betting pairs back-to-back all the way through. Bob pulled in the pot and handed me back my I.O.U. I tore it up. Fuzzy reached for a cracker. They were all gone. He got white and sick and leaned over, and a fellow had to help him out of the room.

"Drinks on the house!" Bob bellowed. "Everybody line up. This is Metropolitan money I spendin', boys, and we're all goin' to get stiff."

The crowd let out a yell and surged toward the bar. I wondered what Foxy would do. He just set out the drinks. I lost track of Jimmy and Mole-Nose in the mob. Bob was still poundin' the bar and yowlin' for action when I went out. It was one o'clock.

No tellin' where my boys was. I was sleepy myself, and wanted to go home, but I knowed better. Somethin' had went wrong in Foxy's biggest set-up, and he wasn't the kind to take it layin' down. I pitied Fuzzy Thompson for what Foxy would do to him, but it was Jimmy I was worried about. The kid was drunk with the sight of all that money, and a money-drunk is the worst kind.

I lurked in the shadders until three-four fights busted out inside. I see three-four fellers get ejected on their saddle-sores, but all the time I hear Bob Wilkerson bellering

"BREAK TRAIL FOR THAT BEARDED HELLION!"

Hardluck Smith, toughest freighter north of Hell, chewed nails and spat tacks and hadn't washed in ten years. Barney Devlin, iron-bellied salooner, pickled his fists in brine and could kill a man with his hands. And this pair feuded, so it was said in the Little Rockies, until they joined forces to fight for a cigar box—stuffed with no-rebate tickets straight to a traitor's Valhalla!

Salty Walt Coburn is on the prod again and Western fiction lovers won't want to miss the smashing novel that leads off this month's big, thrill-jammed issue:

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his head off, gettin' hisself roarin' drunk.

TWO o'clock come—then three—then three-thirty. And then out comes Bob, stuffin' the money into his pocket and yellin' like a Comanche, blind drunk. He had took Foxy Baraw—he thought!—and this was his night to howl. He'd howled his haid off, and now he was goin' down to the depot, where he was sleepin'.

He starts off. The town is quiet. I foller along the other side of the street. Pretty soon I see a figger come out of an alley and move along in front of me, keepin' even with Bob. It's Jimmy Demler. Then in a minute another figger shows up across the street, follerin' along behind Bob. It's Mole-Nose.

"Takin' no chances," I says, sick at my stomach. "Can't get it over the table, they'll get it this way. But I'll get Foxy Baraw for this!"

We reached the railroad track. Bob is weavin' along, singin' and beatin' his laig with his ten-gallon hat. Under the water-tank, I see Mole-Nose and Jimmy close in. I take a runnin' jump and let out a whoop, and hit Jimmy from behind.

"No, you don't you young whelp!" I yelled in his ear.

His gun came out, by instinct I guess, but I had him down, and that yell spooked him. He lit on his face in a puddle that had leaked down from the water tank, and his shot went wild. Old Bob, drunk as he was, still had his nerve with him. He flang himself behind one of the twelve-by-twelve legs that held up the tank. Mole-Nose was purely startled, but them kind are used to tight squeezes. He made a dive for the shadders, pumpin' lead.

"Watch Mole-Nose, Bob," I yelled. "I got 'tother one!"

"You old fool!" Jimmy growled at me, twisting over on his back.

He lifted the gun, not to shoot but to swing at me. Well, I'm not as young as I oncet was. I tried to hold his arm. I just couldn'. The gun hit me twicet that I know of, and last thing I remember is sinkin' down in the water-puddle as Jimmy squirmed out from under me, shootin' one, two, three. Spacin' his shots like old Jim, and crouchin', and fannin' that old gun, and takin' his time.

Then I goes to sleep.

When I woke up, Bob is sloppin' water on my bleedin' scalp and cussin' me for every kind of fool. I sat up. Jimmy Demler is squattin' there in his heels with his gun in his lap. He's lightin' a cigarette, and I see his face. He don't seem hurt none. I see Mole-Nose layin' over there on the cinders, and the way he laid—why, I knowed he was dead.

"You old idjit, Cap!" Bob snarled. "You almost got me killed. Thought Jimmy was robbin' me, didn't you? You ain't got a lick of sense. He's muh body-guard, that boy is."

"Body-guard?" says I. "Jimmy?"

Bob laughed. "Sure! I got rooked in the Metropolitan last year, and I seen how they did it. So I hired me a watcher, too! I hired Jimmy to just stand by and do nothing so long as it was a straight deal, and then foller me home. Fuzzy knowed it was a straight play or trouble. He knowed Jimmy was watchin'. It plumb broke his nerve."

"Then it was an honest game?" I said, still not believin'.

"The first one Fuzzy Thompson ever played," Bob crowed, "and I beat him! Beat him good! Then they tried to lift my winnin's on the way home—but I had me a watcher for that, too!"

"Yes," said I, weakly, "and I bet I know how much he cost you. Two hunnert and fifty dollars."

I see Jimmy grin at me, and I knowed about tomorry he'd come after Trilby, and likely stay to dinner, and then mebbe my daughter would start speakin' to her old man again.

"You're a power in this town," said Bob. "You ort to clean that Metropolitan out. What's the matter with your law?"

"Got too much law," said Jimmy, grinnin' at me.

All right for you, smarty, to laugh at the law, I thinks to myself. *But you're a-goin' to sing another tune, come election time. Sid Cole wants to quit as sheriff, and I can't spare Tom Slaymaker from the Double-Y, and you're it, kid. Never had no sheriffs in my family, but I guess I can get used to it.*

Naw, I didn't run him for sheriff. Nettie wouldn't stand for it. Jimmy's runnin' the Double-Y. They made me run for sheriff myself!

YOU CAN'T CROWD DEATH

When Gatlin yelled, "Get 'em, boys!" all hell broke loose.

By S. T. HIX

With the Red Gatlin gang busting loose, Deputy-Sheriff Slim had to stir-up his boss—and make the easy-going sheriff forget he was a solid family man.

BLACKIE WESTON didn't stay in jail two hours. An hour after we locked him up, old Dave Summers, the only gent who had seen Blackie kill Pete Knowles, was found face down in a back alley with a bullet hole in his head. Thirty minutes later Sheriff Tod Hunter was unlocking Blackie's cell door.

★ ★

Tod swung the massive door open and motioned for Red Gatlin's righthand gunman to come out. Tod pointed at the plate of untouched jailhouse stew and beans on the floor of the cell. He said: "Pretty confident, huh, Blackie?"

Blackie Weston grinned wickedly. He swaggered out of the cell and into the front office and demanded his guns.

I took his gunbelt from its peg on the wall and threw it on the floor. For a minute I thought the damned gunhawk was going to give me an excuse to kill him. He scowled darkly and cussed when he stooped to pick up his guns, but he was careful to cuss to himself.

The sheriff frowned at me. I'm his favorite deputy, but he thinks I'm always trying to stir up trouble. His gaze shifted to Weston, who was tying down his guns. He said: "You tell your boss one of these days he's goin' to step too high."

The black-bearded leadslinger straightened and headed for the door. "Anything you got to tell Gatlin," he flung over his shoulder, "you tell him yourself."

Tod waited till the gunman was out of sight, then he came over and slumped down in a chair across the desk from me. He was fortyish and beginning to get gray around the temples.

"Who do you think killed Dave Summers?" I asked him.

Tod snorted, but he didn't fool me.

There was only one man who could be responsible for that killing: Red Gatlin. Red Gatlin was a range hog. He had decided months ago that he wanted all the range between Grizzly Head Mountain and Little Muddy Creek and had set about getting it in his own crop-burning, fence-cutting way. Few of the nesters dared fight back—and those that tried it were disposed of. That's what had happened to Pete Knowles.

The sheriff knew these things. And he knew I knew. Yet he just sat back and let Gatlin go on getting stronger. I told myself the sheriff didn't have any proof that Gatlin was back of these killings, trying to justify his actions that way. But I knew that if Tod was the man he'd been when I first started deputying for him, he'd have had a showdown before now.

I'd been trying to force a showdown ever since Gatlin started his campaign to take over the whole range, but I hadn't been able to swing it. Tod was happily married and had a fine young button named Johnny. I figured maybe he felt his responsibility too heavy, didn't want to chance getting knocked off. I knew he wasn't yellow. Scared, maybe, yes. You've seen kids facing each other across a line in the dirt, wanting to fight and scared to death to start. But just prod 'em a little and—Brother, watch out! I figured it was that way with Tod. If I could just prod him enough. . . .

Jim Sager came in and I woke up. He sat down on the desk and built a cigarette. "Just come past Jeb Davis' place," he said. "Gatlin gave him till sundown to clear off his place. Jeb aims to fight."

The sheriff hit the desk with his fist and came to his feet. "The damned old fool!" he exploded. "Don't he know they'll cut him down just like they done Pete?"

He swung on me. "Now listen, Slim. You ride out and bring Jeb into town. Knock the old codger over the head if you have to, but get him away before Gatlin gets there."

He put on his hat and went to the door. "I'm going home," he said, and went out mumbling.

A couple of hours later I went out and climbed aboard my wiry buckskin. The Jenkins kid saw me and came a-running.

"Hey, Mr. Slim," he piped. "'Member yesterday when you told me—"

"Save it, Kid," I said. "I'm busy."

I pulled the buckskin's head around and headed for Jeb Davis' place. Hell! It seemed all my plans were going haywire.

I wasn't feeling too good when I clattered across the wooden bridge over Little Muddy and took the winding trail to Jeb's place. I knew I was going to quit my job as soon as I delivered Jeb back to town.

It was still daylight and the sun was thirty minutes high when I came in sight of the cabin. Drawing closer, I could see that the nester had drug his rocking chair out on the porch and was sitting there with his double-barreled shotgun across his lap. He waved and I swung down and told him what I'd come for.

Jeb puffed furiously on his stinking old pipe. "Well, ye can jist go on back," he stated flatly. "'I gonnies, I aim to show Red Gatlin all the vinegar in this county ain't in barrels!"

I knew there wasn't any use to argue but I argued anyhow. And got nowhere. I was watching for my chance to slap him on the head with a gun barrel when I saw Red Gatlin and a handful of his nightriders heading up the trail. It wasn't quite sundown, but I guess Gatlin figured old Jeb wasn't going to run anyway and had decided to get the messy business over with.

THEY came closer and I could see there were four of them. Gatlin was flanked on one side by his black-bearded bodyguard, Blackie Weston, and on the other by two hard-faced gents I didn't remember seeing. They pulled up thirty feet away and Gatlin found himself looking down the barrels of Jeb's muzzleloader. He flicked a glance in my direction, then looked back at the nester.

Jeb found his voice. "Git off my property," the oldster squeaked. "I ain't a-leavin."

Gatlin laughed harshly. "You'll leave, all right. But not alive. Get 'em, boys!"

All hell broke loose then. Gatlin jerked back hard on the reins and his handsome black r'ared back on its hind legs, catching the full load of Jeb's first shot in its broad chest. The black shuddered and fell heavily to the ground, and Gatlin scampered behind its carcass.

I dropped to the floor and rolled off the side of the porch. There seemed to be a helluva lot of shooting going on, but somehow not many bullets were coming my way. By the time I was on the ground and had my gun out, the fight was over. I didn't know how it happened, but there lay Blackie Weston with a hole in his head. Red Gatlin lay face down across the carcass of his dead horse, and the other two hardcases were holding their hands high.

Sheriff Tod Hunter came from around the other side of the cabin with his guns in his hands. Then I knew why old Jeb was still able to stand up and why he hadn't had to use the other barrel of his old muzzleloader.

Pretty soon the sheriff and I were riding back down the trail toward town, our handcuffed prisoners riding ahead. Tom was forking a lathered bay that didn't have a sign of saddle on her. I guessed he'd made up his mind to ride out to Jeb's place pretty sudden-like, and hadn't taken time to saddle up. He hadn't even used the trail—cut straight through the rough country from the bridge. That's why he'd come up to the back of Jeb's cabin.

"Yuh know, Slim," Tod said after awhile. "I'm an old fool. I guess I'd 'a let Gatlin take over the whole county with his killin' and robbin' except for something that happened today."

"Yeah?" I said, feeling him out. "I reckon when you saw he was really gonna kill old Jeb—"

"That old coot! No, Slim, that ain't it a'tall. When I went home today my boy, Johnny, had just come home from school. He had a black eye he'd got fightin' Butch Jenkins. Seems Butch said I was yellow and my button wouldn't take that off nobody. He licked hell out of him. Thank God I came to my senses in time."

They say all's well that ends well. Anyhow, it didn't cost me but fifty cents and I've still got my job and my self respect.

Butch Jenkins came into my office next day. He had two black eyes.

"You owe me four-bits, Mr. Slim," he piped. "I oughtta charge you a buck, though. That Johnny Hunter licked hell outta me! Why you reckon it made him so mad when I said his old man was yellow like you told me to, huh, Mr. Slim?"

★ ARMY MEN WERE FIRST NAVY "WIG-WAGGERS" ★

At the battle of of Mobile Bay in 1862 Admiral Farragut sent a group of U. S. Signal Corpsmen into fighting tops of his warships with the Army's newly developed signal flags to send messages from ship to ship for the first time. Today the Signal Corps communications systems include telegraph, telephone, radio, radar and other electronic devices and the peacetime U. S. Regular Army is training thousands of newly enlisted volunteers each year for these jobs.

★ ★

WELCOME HOME,

Returning home, Jim Whitsitt found that he was going to need all his steadfast loyalty to keep faith in his dancing-girl sweetheart—and to keep from killing his well-meaning friends.

He stepped into the room, calling: "Duck, Loye! Duck!"

CHAPTER 1 Satan Takes Over

Jim Whitsitt scowled when he saw the rider on the trail below him. For three years, Whitsitt's longing for the girl, Blue, had pulled him back to Wyoming. After he saw her, there, would be plenty of time for yarn-spinning and back-slapping with his old neighbors. He had enough money right in his saddleroll to redeem the ranch that his father had left him and his inexperience had lost.

He pulled his big roan into the pine, bedded in giant fern. The rider down on the trail was a girl on a cream-and-bay pinto; and her headlong gallop would take her past him before she could see him.

Below her, a man appeared, spurring his lathered horse in hot pursuit.

The girl came closer, and her features cleared from a shadowed blur. She was Loye McIntosh, his Cousin Meade's adopted daughter. Her waving brown hair fell bright on her shoulders, glinting gold in the sunshine. In spite of her fright, her chin was the same—uptilted and impudent. Her softly modeled mouth showed more poise than when she was a gallant fourteen;

SADDLE-TRAMP!

Punch-Packed Novelette of Cowtown Vengeance

By
RULAND WALTNER

but she was not a girl retreating merely to tantalize a lover she wanted to pursue her.

Her lithe body strained forward in her saddle. She dipped into a fern brake and passed Whitsitt without seeing him. Whitsitt then sent Big Boy from the dappling shadows into the trail, blocking it.

Lifting his bandanna over his mouth and nose and pulling his Stetson low on his forehead, Whitsitt drew his six-shooter and rested its muzzle across the pommel of his saddle. He owed his cousin protection, but he was not going to waste time.

The man rider came into gunshot range. His horse was blowing. Lather creamed its hot flanks and foam from its mouth flecked the man's booted legs. His clothing and trappings were of the best; and he sat his saddle tight and flexible as bailing wire.

At Whitsitt's shout, the man pulled to a stop. He stared angrily upward.

"Ain't a holdup is it?" he called. Sunlight fell on his face. He was a stranger. Under his broad-brimmed hat, his brow was narrow and low. His eyes were slitted in a smooth olive face. His mouth was covered by a dark, drooping mustache that tapered to silken points below his jawbone.

Whitsitt said crisply, "I'm riding downtrail. I don't aim to have you on my back."

The man rested both of his gauntleted hands in plain view on the pommel of his saddle.

"I got business uptrail," he protested.

"The way the lady was running from you says it was plenty unwelcome," drawled Whitsitt. "Get going, Mister."

The stranger reached for his gun, a motion as unexpected as lightning in a cloudless sky; but, before his fingers could close on the butt, Whitsitt's shot tore through the back of his glove.

Whitsitt shifted his gun, and the sunlight turned it into a gleaming blue rod in his hand. "You're quick," he conceded, "but, if I hadn't had the jump on you, I'd blown your hand off." His voice changed. "Get going," he snapped. "She's got a lead that horse of yours'll never close."

The man broke into profanity. He set spur to his horse and threw it uptrail, in the direction of Meade McIntosh's Lazy M Ranch and the wide acres of the Maltese Cross that had been Whitsitt's old home.

Whitsitt took up his way. Things had changed around Red Rock. When he was a kid, growing up, women did not get chased around the country, at least, not unless they wanted to. When he saw Blue, he would find out what had happened. Certainly, adopted or not, Loye McIntosh was one of his family; and she had a right to count on his protection.

The descent was steep, and he held a stiff rein on Big Boy. Blue would be a happy girl when he showed her the gold in his saddleroll. Her nights need no longer belong to the Silver Slipper Dance Hall and Saloon. It meant freedom for her, just as it meant respect for him in the hills where cattlemen were still supreme.

The trail swung out on a rocky bank. Below him, the town of Red Rock wriggled in the same crooked cue of low wooden buildings that he had left a long three years ago.

"Tough little burg!" he said softly. "But not so tough as some I've seen."

The horse answered with a toss of his head that jingled his bit. His worn shoes clinked against the rocky hillside below Blue's cabin.

Whitsitt pursed his lips and whistled, *Shoo, Fly—Dont' Bodder Me.* Three years ago, when the piano at the Silver Slipper struck up that song, he looked for Blue. It was their dance.

Something white glimmered through the trees. The song trailed into a long note of surprise. Blue's cabin was painted! A porch, rock floored and pillared, had been added along one side. The curtains at the window were lace instead of cheese-cloth. At one corner of the house was a cistern! She did not have to carry water from the spring any more. She had prospered while he was gone.

He circled the cabin and hid his horse in a clump of choke-cherry. Stripping off his saddleroll, he strode downhill with it thrown over his shoulder, whistling again. He crossed the porch and dropped his load before the side door, his hickory brown eyes sparkling.

Blue would, of course, be asleep, tired by her night's dancing at the Silver Slipper. His whistle would thread her dreams, and she would move restlessly on her pillow. He whistled louder. She would sit up in bed, wide awake, wondering. She would spring out and throw on something, eager to investigate even a dream that meant him!

The door before him opened, not eagerly as he expected but promptly and cautiously. He looked down on the smooth top of her head, circled by coronet braids. He got a glimpse of white face above a fresh white shirtwaist, of dangling sapphire earrings and a sapphire blue skirt that did not hide her small, round ankles.

He swept her into his arms and gave her the long, hungry kiss he had been saving for her. At first he found no response in her, but she did not struggle against him.

He felt her breath against his lips. "Jim! You've come home!"

Her arms slipped up about him, trembling.

When at last he held her off, and looked at her, both of them were laughing, short of breath.

"Come in, Jim darling!" she said, her words falling over one another.

She was fully dressed, trim and beautiful, without the frills she wore at the Silver Slipper. His eyes held her in every detail—her hair, her face, her slim, rounded body.

"Come in, Jim," she begged. "Don't stand there staring! You've been gone so long!"

Her glance slid over his shoulder, down the slope, toward town. She probably had business in town, but she could forget it now that he was here. Now, any business either of them had could wait!

He bent and scooped up his saddleroll.

"Not without this!" he said as he swung it through the door, into her sitting room.

She looked at the dusty canvas, and her nose crinkled in a way that had always fascinated him. "Funny kind of saddle tramp you turned out to be! Not even a horse!"

"Saddle tramp!" he repeated softly, and again he gathered her into his arms. "That's what I been for three rotten years! Roamed through all Texas. Broke horses no other buster'd throw a leg on. You made me do that. I wanted you so, and needed a decent place to keep you! I'm not much of a writing man, Blue. But I wrote you. I never got an answer, but I was traveling all the time. Never knew where I'd strike for next."

Her hands, resting on his arms, closed on them, tight and nervous, as if she had heard something his ears had failed to catch.

He touched the sapphire pendants that dangled from the pink lobes of her ears. "You'd oughtn't spent your money for these, honey. I'd got them for you."

She shook her head, and the sapphires sparkled at him. She laughed; and her teeth, white and even, made her lips look redder; but her sidelong glance avoided his, whipped to the window, and back.

She said, "You'd ought to get a horse first, Jimmy!"

A horse! he thought. *That's Blue. Always worrying about me. Like the first time I ever saw her!*

WHEN Blue first came to Red Rock, every man in the country who did not have a knowing and watchful wife put on his hat and guns and swaggered in and out of the Silver Slipper, all because she was there. Mike Wiggans, the owner, went about in a daze, more than half-mad about her, himself, but not willing to give up the rush of business that putting up a no-trespass sign would mean. Whitsitt's own cousin, Meade McIntosh, and Old Man Patton of the bank, and Tracy Travers of the Big Butte Ranch, and a sprinkling of other ranchers and copper kings from down south stampeded in every night. McIntosh pulled out after the second round. He said it was too-fast company for a widower with a half-grown girl. Whitsitt got a late start. The death of his father laid such responsibilities on him that it was weeks before he got to the Slipper. Then Tracy Travers was high man.

"Poor girl!" had bleated Old Man Patton, made tender by Blue's tales of a hard childhood. "She'd better stayed back in Seattle with her ma and her little brothers and sisters. Of course, being the family drudge after her pa got killed ain't a life to draw a young girl. But Travers don't mean no good by her. Mark my words, Jim, no woman who ain't got false teeth and the St. Vitus dance is safe around Travers!"

Whitsitt had thought of several things he might say about Patton himself and his weakness for women, but he did not. He had sat in a game of stud poker and watched Blue more than he did the cards. He had never seen any one like her—white skin with the flush of dawn in it. His manhood sat new on him, and just to watch the color come and go in her cheeks fascinated him. He had never seen a woman whose eyes could tease and promise and caress and rebuff in a single glance; and her bronze eyebrows curved like swallows in flight.

When the music had started and Travers snugged a heavy arm about her, Whitsitt threw down his cards and left the game, surging hot with the desire to fight any one about anything. He had danced the next dance with her. How it happened, he could not remember. Now it seemed he had just

blundered in and taken her, but that could not have been. Tracy Travers was not a man to let any one take anything away from him—particularly a girl like Blue. She had said something quick and sharp to Travers, and he had laughed and let his prisoning hand slip down her bare, round arm to her wrist. He shook her hand gently and dropped it.

"You'll be coming back to Tracy, begging for candy, Baby," he said and moved away to join the poker game, easy and alert. He usually got the things he wanted without making much stir.

While they had danced, Blue said, "You're Jim Whitsitt of the Maltese Cross. I've heard a lot about you!"

"No good, I reckon," he had mumbled with the perfume of her hair swirling dizzily through him.

"Folks say you're a man to tie to. I ain't never known any one—man or women—loyal like they say you are."

"I don't aim to let my bunch down," he said.

Tears had misted her eyes, and he had thought of her widowed mother and the brothers and sisters in Seattle. Maybe a girl like her just could not stay tied with a family like that. But she was probably sending money home each week. Cash was not plentiful in Red Rock, but what there was circulated; and a pretty girl could get her hands on some of it.

Whitsitt had never asked Blue about her family. She did not seem to like to talk about her past, except to Old Man Patton. Besides, they had not had much time to talk of anything but themselves—they went in deep so fast. Tracy Travers got ugly, but Meade McIntosh reminded him that the Big Butte owner and Whitsitt's father had been lifelong friends and the son needed something to tie to after losing his father. "Jim wants to marry her," he told Travers earnestly. "She's just another girl to you, no more important than one heifer out of a herd."

But Whitsitt and the Maltese Cross had gone broke before he could get Blue into the notion of marrying him—and then he had nothing to offer. . . .

AS WHITSITT stood in Blue's cabin, staring down on her bronze-red hair and fine skin, on her lovely color and fascinating almond-shaped eyes, he could understand how he had gone head over heels in debt for her. If any man had anything Blue wanted or if he could possibly get it, he would hand it over.

"Darling!" Blue murmured in the circle of his arms.

Her voice cut off, broken by a sudden shattering sound—gunfire—one shot, two, a series of them that crackled in the world outside the cabin.

The shooting was in front of the house. Whitsitt sprang for a window that looked down the slope toward the town.

Blue held him back. "Don't go out! You'll be killed!"

Gently, he thrust her behind him. "I ain't careless," he reminded her. "I'm taking a look-see."

Without moving the lace curtain, he peered through the coarse mesh.

A young fellow in tight corduroy breeches and high, fancy boots flattened himself against the sheltering trunk of a huge pine tree while he held off three gunmen in dirty, flapping vests and shapeless chaps. The young fellow's hat had been shot off a mop of black hair that shone above a devil-may-care face. His wide, dark eyes flashed behind his smoking gun. He was returning shot for shot.

Whitsitt started for the front door, but the girl clung closer, crying in white anguish, "Don't Jim! It's not your fight, Jim!"

"The kid needs a helper to even things up," he said.

"Mike Thurlow's no kid! And besides, he asked for it!"

"Been rustling cows?" he asked. "Horse-thief or killer?"

"No! No!" she cried desperately. "I'll explain later. But they mustn't see you here!"

She wound herself tighter against him; so that he would have had to hurt her to be free.

"I ain't sure what's worrying you, Blue," he said. "Folks ought to get used to seeing me here."

A keening cry cut in on them. She put a hand over each ear and quivered. Whitsitt looked again through the window. Young Thurlow lay on the ground. The three men stood over him.

One of the gunmen pushed Thurlow

with his foot, turning him from his stomach onto his back.

"Foreigner," thought Whitsitt as a monocle suspended on a red silken cord slipped from the gunman's shirt pocket, caught the sun, and blazed.

Deliberately, Whitsitt reached for his gun, but Blue's soft hands grasped his, hot and moist and surprisingly strong.

"He's dead, Jim!" she pleaded. "There's nothing you can do!"

"Which are you scared of," he persisted, "me or those killers?"

She flared at him. "Things have changed since you were here! Travers and Patton and all that bunch are gone. I'll explain later, but please take your things and go!"

He looked down on her bewildered. "Travers gone," he thought. "And Patton!" The change he felt back on the trail was real. He was stepping into a game of life and death, where the cards were already dealt.

She was white and shaken and so terribly in earnest that he pleaded, "Whatever the fracas is, I'll be on one side or the other. We're living in Red Rock the rest of our lives. We're raising a family here, and I aim to do my part keeping it fair-to-middling decent."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she said desperately. "But if you love me, you'll get out until I smooth things over. If any one knew you'd been here—"

Her hands closed tighter on his. Wide-eyed, she listened while the sound of hoofbeats rose and dimmed as the horsemen retreated toward town.

Whitsitt tore away from her. He swept the front door open. The gunmen were gone. Thurlow had not moved.

"He's dead, all right," he said shortly. "Those birds'd never left him if he wasn't."

Beside him, Blue wept softly. He tried to take her into his arms, but she avoided him.

"Sweetheart," he begged, "tell me all about it."

She shook her head. "I'm going into Red Rock. I'm going to the Silver Slipper. The one thing I asked of you, Jim, was to go—and you won't!"

Beaten, he bent for his saddleroll. "I reckon," he said unhappily, "I was a fool to think I could stay away so long and pick up where I left off."

"It's not that," she cried. "But I've got to take care of this myself. If any one mixes in, it'll be that much harder."

"You're a good talker, Blue," he said. "Ain't no one else could make me sneak out a side door while a dead man's decorating the front. If you need me," he added gently, "I'll be at the Lazy M."

With his saddleroll over his shoulder, he started for the side door, hoping she would call him back; but she stood there, and gave no sign that she realized he was leaving.

He opened the door and strode up the hillside to the choke-cherry clump that hid his horse, none too careful whether any one saw him or not.

He thought bitterly that he had had no chance to tell her the big news—that his saddleroll held enough gold to redeem the Maltese Cross and all its wide acres beyond the Lazy M.

"Meade McIntosh's the man to see," he thought. "He'll know all that's happened. I can trust him. Loyalty's bred into his bone and blood."

CHAPTER 2 Bushwhack Trail

Jim Whitsitt took the short-cut that he and his young cousin, Loye McIntosh, used when they were youngsters, hunting quail or long-legged jackrabbits.

Old land marks rose before him and swept past—the rock they called the Wigwam, where they played Indian. Loye had been so small she had only one role, the white captive of the tribe of Indians of which he had been the chief. In the hollow tree beyond, they had found a store of honey that lasted through a whole winter.

Big Boy leaped the brook where they had fished for mountain trout. Not even the memory of the long strings of fish he and Loye used to carry home could bring him from his brown study.

Red Rock had changed. And to him Red Rock meant Blue. She had a life here in which he had no part. She had had to solve her problems alone. But he would change all that. He would make her turn to him for help, just as she had done before he left.

He topped a swell and saw Loye McIntosh far ahead of him on foot, trudging uncertainly toward home in her high-heeled boots.

He set spur to Big Boy. Why was she afoot? Where was her horse? Had the advantage he gave her against the stranger been too little?

Cursing himself, he cupped his mouth with his hand and shouted, "Wait, Loye! It's Jim Whitsitt!"

She stopped beside the trail till he came alongside, swung down from his saddle, and caught her by both shoulders.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, his words hoarse with concern.

"Of course," she answered, looking up at him with eager, questioning eyes. "Oh, Jim, it's fine to have you back!"

She looked as if she expected the old friendly kiss they used to exchange when either of them left or returned from a long trip.

He rejected the thought.

"You're sure you're all right?" he repeated urgently.

She laughed with the familiar lift of her shoulders. "What makes you think I'm not?"

"You're on foot! Wasn't some one following you?"

The curiosity in her eyes deepened. "Zan Alexander. Pinto threw a shoe so I sent him home the long way to make sign for him to follow. But that was hours ago."

Whitsitt released her. He took off his hat and drew his forearm over his brow, wiping away the sweat that had sprung there.

"Whee-oo!" he whistled. "Blue told me things had changed, but I didn't guess how much! You're my folks, Loye; and seeing you on foot raised my hair."

"Well," she said casually, "I feel snubbed. Seems like you've seen every one but me and Father."

She turned and took her way on foot. Her back was small and straight and indignant.

"Heh, Loye," he called. "I thought I held up your friend Alexander long enough. How could I know your horse'd throw a shoe?"

She whirled on him angrily. "Just why did you horn in?" she snapped. "Maybe I wanted him to follow me?" She whirled again and ran toward home as fast as her boots would let her. She too had changed, he thought but, for old time's sake, he would not let her get away with it!

He seized the pommel of his saddle and vaulted onto Big Boy as the horse swung into a lope. He came abreast of Loye. Bending from the saddle, he circled her with one arm and drew her up before him. She did not fight against him, but she did protest.

"I won't ride with you, Jim!"

"Oh, yes, you will!" he said firmly. "I got questions to answer. First: From the looks of Alexander, I figured my cousin wouldn't want him tagging along."

She was silent.

"Second: I saw Blue because I asked her to marry me before I left."

Still she said nothing.

"Deaf or dumb?" he demanded.

Her voice came small and choked. "You'd hate anything I could say."

He put his hand under her chin and turned her head gently. She struggled against it but, when at last he could look into her face, her eyelashes drooped; and he could not see what lay in her clear blue eyes.

"We've been chums a long time," he said earnestly. "We ought to stay that way."

"No," she said. "You'd better let me down."

"Shucks!" he exclaimed vehemently. "You've gone loco."

"Maybe."

"Why?"

Her eyes flashed open, wide and angry, as if she had held back the words as long as she could. "Blue's a pair with Zan Alexander! If you want to know more, ask Father. Now put me down!"

Whitsitt drew rein on Big Boy; and, pushing himself back off the horse's rump, he dropped to the ground.

"You're still my folks," he said. "I think a lot of you, but I don't reckon a man ought to listen to talk about the woman he's going to marry."

"Jim," she cried, fumbling in the tangle of reins he threw around her, "I'm not—"

He gave Big Boy a resounding thump. "Take the lady home," he commanded. "She'll let you know where that is."

The roan leaped forward, stretching into a long lope.

"Tell Ling Poo to put my name in the pot," he called after her. "And take good care of my saddleroll. It's extra special."

He entrusted it to her without misgiving.

Anything that belonged to him was safe with her. Besides, no one knew he had money, much less that he carried it in his saddleroll.

Girl and horse were far up the shortcut. He grinned. She was a sporting little human, and she was probably thinking that things could never be the same between them. She might be right. She and Blue were very different. When he set up housekeeping next to the Lazy M, the McIntosh's would accept Blue as one of the family; but they could never give her the understanding and unquestioning loyalty that had existed between the two households as far back as he remembered. It would not be Blue's fault, of course—or any one else's. It would be a situation he would have to accept.

IT WAS nightfall, when, foot-weary, Whitsitt arrived at the Lazy M. He had expected Loye to send a man with a horse back for him, but she had not.

Lights shone in every window of the sprawling one story building. The hitchrail in front was empty, and he could see no movement inside. He thought uneasily of Loye and of his saddleroll, too. He put his fingers to his lips and whistled—one long and two shorts, which was his old signal of approach.

No one answered.

His tired legs took a longer stride. He tried to tell himself that nothing had happened to Loye. She was too good at taking care of herself. She knew how to use the small pistol she always carried with her when she left the ranch, and Big Boy was dependable. But just because some silky-haired skunk had chased her cross-country and she was a relation by adoption did not mean that she could treat him any old way!

He pulled open the screen and stamped into the house, shouting, "Meade! Where are you?"

He crossed the front room to the dining-room. The table was set, but there was no food.

His cousin's room was on his left. It opened; and Loye stood on the threshold, still dressed as she had been on the trail, her light brown hair dishevelled.

Whitsitt scowled at her.

"Where's your pa?" he demanded before he noticed how pale she was, how wide and miserable her eyes were.

She nodded to the room behind her. "He's shot, Jim. When I got home, I put your horse in the corral and had one of the boys carry your saddleroll to the east bedroom. I kept my eye on it and locked it in." She handed him the key. "Then I went to the porch and met Landers and Boozy Butterfield bringing Father in. Smitty's gone for Dr. Byers. Slim took the other boys to the creek where they found Father. If they can pick up a trail, they'll follow it."

Whitsitt stammered, "H-how is he, Loye? Bad hurt?"

She stepped back and motioned him in. "He's alive. We weren't sure at first."

Whitsitt went to the side of the bed. The pine-tree quilt was pulled smooth under his cousin's chin. Lying so still, hardly breathing, he looked young and vigorous, and a boyish companionableness showed in the corners of his mouth and the laughter lines about his eyes.

Whitsitt looked questioningly at Loye. "I didn't figure he had an enemy in the world."

Her eyes misted, but she held back her tears. "I told you things had changed, Jim. Every one likes him. But, just the same, he got a shot in the back."

Loyalty stirred strongly in Whitsitt. "If you don't need me, I'll be going," he said. "Where did the boys find him?"

"By the beaver dam, above the place we used to call the Den."

Under a full moon, Jim Whitsitt, with the Lazy M riders, followed the tracks of Meade McIntosh's horse till they crossed the creek. They showed, now and then, blood stains alongside, which were harsh reminders of his betrayal. On the far side of the creek, there were no stains. So, they argued, whoever did the shooting must have lain in ambush until McIntosh was in mid-crossing.

A search of the hills now would be more of devotion than wisdom; for the night hid signs that daylight might reveal if their horses' hoofs did not confuse the trail. So they accepted delay to prepare for an early morning search.

They returned to the ranch house shortly after midnight.

Loye met them on the porch. "Dr. Byers is with him," she said. "Father's still unconscious. But he has a chance, if we can keep him quiet."

The men tiptoed into the long dining room. Ling Poo served them pancakes and coffee. With gruff voices muted, they discussed the shooting.

"Things has changed a heap since you was here," Boozy Butterfield explained as he drenched his cakes with sorghum. "Travers used to run things plumb decent, if you didn't cross him. He got shot, couple of years ago. Old Man Patton kicked off, too. Broke his neck one night riding in from Cody. Driv off a cliff, seemed like. Strangers been drifting in ever since. Fellow by the name of Alexander—called Zan by his friends, which I ain't—took over Patton's bank. Moved out onto your place, too. Found copper there—between the creek and the house. Been all sorts of shootings and land-grabbings. Red Rock ain't what it used to be!"

"So I've heard," said Whitsitt dryly. "I reckon that copper he found turned out a bonanza?"

"No one knows but Alexander, and he won't say."

Whitsitt pushed back his chair and wandered onto the porch. Moonlight silvered the world. He started pacing, restless but thoughtful. When he reached the steps, a figure rose. It was Loye. She had been crying.

"Don't, kid," he said gently. "No sneaking coyote's going to get the best of Meade."

"You don't know!" she said tremulously. "All Red Rock's turned coyote—or yellow belly. I'm afraid for father—and you—and every decent person left! You don't know Zan Alexander."

"My spunky little cousin afraid?" he asked.

He stepped closer so that he could search her face; but again she turned away, hiding herself from him as she had never done in the old days.

"Tell me what's happened," he urged her. "I came here to ask Meade, but he won't talk for a long time."

"What do you want to know?" she asked dully.

"Everything."

She shook back the hair that clung to her cheeks. "I couldn't tell you, Jim. I don't know. Nobody does. But no woman's safe in Red Rock. What you saw this morning wasn't the first time. I haven't told Father because he'd go gunning for Alexander; and our kind falls, one by one. The little fellows went first, any of them who didn't like the way things were going, then Travers, Patton, Tom Wheeler of the Double X, old Judge Gerry, a prospector by the name of Gregory who came in with Alexander and found the copper on your place. Boozy Butterfield's cousin Marcy who was sheriff was the last. I can't begin to name them all. But you'll hear."

He nodded gravely. *No wonder Blue was afraid!* he thought. *But why did she want me to go away? Why didn't she come along?*

"Who's back of it, Loye?" he asked.

"Father says it'll go on like this till some one gets Alexander."

"That fellow who chased you?" he asked, remembering the smooth, unlined face and the silky mustaches.

She nodded. "I was terribly afraid."

Whitsitt's hands closed tight on the railing. He stared out into the moonlit yard, toward the corrals and the bunkhouse. He wanted to comfort Loye. He wanted to ride back to Red Rock and get Blue. He wanted to go to the Maltese Cross and drive Alexander out. But, instead, he asked quietly, "Do you think he shot Meade?"

"I don't know," she answered helplessly. "He's not the kind to do his own killing—unless he's forced to it, man to man."

Whitsitt paced to the end of the porch and back. He dropped his hands on Loye's shoulders. He said, "I'm sticking by you."

She drooped under his sympathy.

"Snap out of it," he begged. "Or use my shoulder to cry on!"

"I can't," she said faintly.

"Why?" He shook her gently. "Ain't I a right to take care of you?"

"No," she answered more faintly.

He held her off and looked at her. "What do you mean, Loye?"

"If you're going to marry that woman—no!" She wrenched herself free and ran toward the door.

He watched her go, amazed, even a little angry. Women! He had always heard that no man understood them. But Loye had been different.

Down in the corral, a horse whinnied. Off in the hills a wolf howled. The rising wind set a rocker in motion at the far end of the porch.

He thought, *Loye sure don't like Blue! Wonder why. Not jealous. She's a kid. But pretty grown up. Seventeen, I reckon. But, shucks, she's my family!*

Silently, he passed into the house. He stopped by his cousin's door and listened. With McIntosh threatened, death seemed to blanket the whole house.

Whitsitt went on, to the room Loye had given him. He unstrapped his saddleroll and lifted out his bag of gold. He tossed it into the back of his closet and dropped an old coat carelessly over it. He could depend on a casual hiding place for it.

From the saddleroll, he rummaged things he would need. He stopped in the kitchen and gathered some food together. The Lazy M riders might wait for morning to begin their search. He was beginning now. And, when he got home, he hoped Red Rock would again be a good place for him to start life with Blue.

CHAPTER 3 Over to the Enemy

The first rays of the morning sun found Whitsitt on Little Creek. Long before the riders from the Lazy M reached the place where Meade McIntosh had been shot, Whitsitt picked up sign. Looking down on the creek from a high shelf of rock, he saw on a ledge below him something that reflected light whitely, like a huge blazing diamond.

Dismounting, he scrambled down. A monocle dangled from a broken red cord that was tangled in an upshoot of scrub oak. Surely, it was the same glass that one of the three gunmen had worn yesterday when Mike Thurlow was shot to death on the hillside below Blue's cabin. The foreigner again! He should not be hard to trace in Red Rock.

He slipped the lense into his shirt pocket and examined the ground. The man's trail was plain. On foot, Whitsitt followed it from the ledge to a hollow where it joined the tracks of two others. They led to more open, level ground where they had all mounted horses and ridden away.

Whitsitt returned to Big Boy and took up his trailing, following a devious way that ended at the Maltese Cross.

The place was changed. The grape arbor his father had built for his mother was torn down. The oak where, as a child, he had had a rope swing, had been cut. Fire had taken the smokehouse that had always been choked with choice venison and beef. The flower boxes that each summer made a bright line of scarlet along the edge of the porch were gone, and the petunia beds had been stripped away.

Big Boy stopped at the rail that paralleled the porch. Whitsitt swung to the ground.

A man with a swollen nose bulging between small red eyes opened the door. He wore a cook's apron that not only hid his hands but anything they might hold.

"I've got business with the boss," Whitsitt said curtly.

The big-nosed man opened the door with the toe of his boot, but he did not take his hands from under his apron, and he did not invite Whitsitt in. Instead, he grunted, turned a broad, fat back, and waddled away.

Almost at once, the door at the far end of the sitting room opened; and Zan Alexander appeared on the threshold.

At sight of Whitsitt, he lifted his hand to his mustache and brushed its wispy ends swiftly upward. He cleared his throat and blinked his slitted eyes. If he recognized Whitsitt as the man who made him lose Loye McIntosh on the trail yesterday, he gave no sign.

"You're Alexander," Whitsitt said. "I'm Jim Whitsitt."

The man nodded and moved aside for Whitsitt to enter.

The room had an air of greater luxury than he remembered, with two bear skin rugs on the floor, an over-sized liquor cabinet between the windows, and a handsome hair-cloth sofa before the fireplace; but the color and the charm were gone. Standing there, still waiting, Alexander made Whitsitt think of the jaguars he occasionally saw in Texas, relaxed but alert as they watched in ambush for their prey to get into a position from which a kill would be certain.

"I've come to redeem the Maltese Cross," Whitsitt said.

Alexander shifted his well shod feet. He thrust his hand between the lower buttons of his vest so that his fingers cupped his stomach.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"You're handling the old Patton matters at the bank?" Whitsitt asked.

"Sure."

"Then you know I've got time on my redemption papers."

"I know the ranch is part of my holdings," Alexander said smoothly. "I haven't seen any redemption papers, and I won't give the place up."

The words were like a blow below the belt, but Whitsitt said quietly, "I reckon you haven't looked very hard. Meade McIntosh's got my copy of the papers. I aim to take you to him and show you."

Alexander's narrow eyes closed with the smile that hardened his lips.

"One of my men rode in from Red Rock this morning. The news is McIntosh was murdered last night."

Whitsitt did not deny his cousin's death. If Alexander believed he held trumps, Whitsitt could see how he played the game. One day soon they were going to lock. The clash was merely a matter of timing.

"News travels fast," he said. "How about riding over now? If Meade's been murdered, they'll go over his papers soon, and the ones he was keeping for me will turn up."

Alexander moistened his lips under his silken mustache.

"I wouldn't want to intrude on Miss Loye's grief," he said.

"You surprise me," Whitsitt said coolly. "I was the fellow who stopped you on the trail yesterday. I'd say you was intruding plenty then."

Little motes of color writhed between Alexander's lids, but he made no other show of emotion.

He said, "I knew your horse when you rode up. I got you covered three ways. So it won't be healthy to start anything." He turned and called sharply.

Men stepped into the room. The cook with the bulging nose brought two guns from under his apron. A hairy, bow-legged man with a lax jaw and a low brow came in from the dining room, cradling a shotgun.

"Karl!" Alexander shouted impatiently.

A third man leaned in the window from the porch. Pale blue eyes looked out of the shadows under his hat, and his blond mustaches were tobacco-stained. The six gun he rested on the sill seemed a part of his hand, animate and sure, but most obvious to Whitsitt was the bit of broken red silk cord that railed across his vest pocket. He was the man Whitsitt had followed from the creekbed where McIntosh was shot, the monocled man who helped kill Mike Thurlow.

"Karl," Alexander repeated, "I'm going to the Lazy M with Jim Whitsitt. Hold him responsible if anything goes wrong. And that job in Red Rock ought to be done today."

He moved toward a rack on the wall and took down a black Stetson which he placed carefully on his thick, dark hair. He picked up his gunbelt and buckled it around his thighs.

"Ready?" he asked.

He led the way from the house; and Whitsitt followed, feeling puzzled and cheap. Alexander was doing what he wanted him to do, but he knew no sense of victory. Even though he had established the fact that Karl was Alexander's killer, he felt like a blind man in the thick of a deadly gun fight.

LOYE was on the porch when they rode up to the Lazy M. "Father's much better, Jim," she said, her tired eyes avoiding Alexander. "He wants to see you, and he said to bring Mr. Alexander with you."

Whitsitt glanced at Alexander. His smooth brown face showed no surprise that Meade McIntosh was still alive.

"Every time I see old Meade," said Whitsitt with a grin, "I thank my stars I had a McIntosh for a mother! Bullets bounce off them!"

Loye led them to her father's room and took a chair near his head. She picked up a piece of embroidery and seemed to give it her whole attention. The two men stood on either side of the bed, plumbing the gray eyes that looked up at them, clear and alert, unshadowed by the pain that drew McIntosh's face into gaunt lines and drained its ruddy color.

"Welcome home, Jim!" he said softly.

Whitsitt took the hand that reached for him. "I'm glad to be here, Meade. Do you want to see Alexander?"

"I want him to see me," McIntosh corrected him.

Whitsitt felt constraint between the two, constraint born in people who hate each other and the things each stands for but who do not discount each other's strength.

"He's a force in Red Rock," McIntosh

resumed. "He ought to know what I'm thinking. Other folks, too."

"Is the doc letting you talk?" Alexander asked.

McIntosh smiled. "That shot in the back is so low it don't bother my lungs or my head either! It was falling off my horse that knocked me out."

Whitsitt said gravely, "What are folks thinking, Meade?"

"One of two things. Either Alexander's number'll come up soon, and he'd ought to be careful; or, if he's the only man of importance around here who don't have accidents, that'll mean something, too."

Loye's head bent lower over her embroidery. Her needle took a stitch too long. She did it over. Both McIntosh and Whitsitt stared at Alexander, saw the blood darken his face and his slitted eyes glitter.

"McIntosh," he said in a voice he tried obviously to keep cool and even, "I'd ought to drag you out of that bed and kill you! But shooting corpses ain't worth while. So I'm keeping my eyes open, like you say. If that's all you got on your mind, I'll go."

Whitsitt cut in sharply, "Just a minute. I brought you here to show you my redemption papers. You got them handy, Meade? Where I or maybe Loye can get them? I'm taking back the Maltese Cross."

Delight flashed into Loye's face; but, when her father made no response but lay quiet in his bed, her face went still, too; and she returned to her embroidery.

"You sure you left them here?" McIntosh asked at last.

"Don't you remember?" asked Whitsitt. "Well, I'll be—" His words trailed.

McIntosh was looking directly at the ceiling, and Alexander's lips twitched with triumph.

Whitsitt looked again at Loye. She had stopped sewing and was arranging a length of pale blue floss on the white embroidery cloth.

"I gave you my copy, Meade, when I went to Texas," he insisted. "Old Man Patton had the other, and Alexander says he's never seen it."

He caught the design Loye was shaping, a single word—"No." She was signaling him to drop the subject.

"You know, Jim," McIntosh's voice sounded weak. "I think you're mixed up." His eyes closed wearily.

"Father's talked enough," Loye said quickly. "After Mr. Alexander goes, you'll come back and sit with Father, won't you, Jim?"

Alexander's leave-taking was like an expulsion on the one hand and a threat on the other, with no gesture of hospitality from either man.

When Whitsitt got back to his cousin's room, Loye's chair was empty.

McIntosh smiled at him. "Things aren't so bad as I made out," he said. "I've got your papers, but I had to stall before Alexander."

"I don't get you," said Whitsitt.

"I STALLED," McIntosh repeated. "If I'd said I had them, he'd burned us out tonight; and the whole house with the papers in it would have gone up in smoke. He's a snake, but I just told him what I've been wanting to tell him a long time. It'll make him wary, but it may make him hold his hand till I can get on my feet again."

"You and Blue and Loye!" Whitsitt exclaimed. "Are things really so bad?"

McIntosh looked at him steadily. "Loye can't know half of it," he said. "Girls like her don't. As for Blue, she's gone over to the enemy."

Whitsitt's spirit had been pricked raw by things that he hated and could not understand, things that threatened to snatch from him all he wanted in life. He said slowly, "What do you mean—the enemy."

"I mean Zan Alexander. He's responsible for robbing and killing most of the men you knew as first citizens. Folks around here who don't know what loyalty means throw in with him. Maybe they last longer. I don't know. Remember the story Old Man Patton used to tell about Blue running out on her old woman and the kids when her old man got killed and the going was hard?"

Whitsitt rose and crossed to the window, where he could see old familiar things that would let him believe that the Lazy M at least was as he remembered it.

He said in a voice that he tried to make casual and hard, "I think more of you than any man on earth, Meade; but I couldn't take your talk if you were standing. I wouldn't want to fight you about Blue or anything else, but I reckon I would."

A clock on the bureau ticked loudly. In the stillness, they could hear Ling Poo in

the kitchen moving pans. A bee blundered against the windowpane in front of Whitsitt and bounced back, buzzing angrily.

Whitsitt drummed his fingers on the windowsill. His cousin had reminded him of something he tried to forget and never succeeded in excusing. If he could only have been sure Blue was sending money home to her family, he could have forgotten—but now he remembered the lace curtains at her cabin windows, the cistern, the paint, the new stone porch.

"Sorry, Jim," McIntosh said quietly. "I'll be on my feet some day, and we can use our fists if you want; but I'm not taking back what I said. You've been gone three years, and no one really knew her when you left. She ain't got it in her to be loyal to anything or any one, and you might as well not expect it. Now—about those papers! My advice is to keep mum. We'll work something out."

From the far side of the house came the sound of horses' hoofs. Riders were breaking off the trail from Red Rock.

The door opened, and Loye thrust in an excited head.

"Jim!" Her call was hardly more than a whisper as she wriggled through and closed the door, setting her back against it. "The sheriff's got a posse out there to arrest you. He says Mike Thurlow was snooping around Blue's cabin, and you came home and killed him. Slim's got a horse for you on the short cut. You can make it out the window. We'll hold them off."

Whitsitt strode across the room toward her. He looked down at her fiercely. "You're not holding anyone off for me!"

He started to thrust her aside, but she held her ground.

"I don't mean fight them," she explained. "We won't need to. Alexander don't want any one but you this time, and he's trying to do it legal. He's not even here. We're safe. Please go!"

He hesitated. "Do you think I killed Thurlow and came running here to hide?"

"What's the difference what I think?" she blazed. "You're crazy about Blue. Lots of other men have— Oh, I'm sorry, Jim! I'll believe anything you want me to, but please go!"

He caught her by the wrist and drew her close so that she would have to see that he was in earnest.

"I haven't shot any one yet, Loye. You can believe me. But when I prove some things to myself, I'm busting loose!"

He dropped her wrist and strode back to the window. He could hear men talking in the late afternoon quiet. He lifted the sash and threw out a leg. Ducking, he slid through and dropped to the ground. Stealthily, he took up his way toward Slim and the horse Loye had ready for him.

Night was coming on. The shadow that companioned him was long and swift but not so black against the paling sunlight on the grass as the shadow that fear laid on his every hope.

Alexander would, of course, have his perjured witnesses to Thurlow's shooting. Blue knew who did it, but Whitsitt could not drag her into it. He would have to have it out with Alexander.

He reached the mark that he and Loye had called the Wigwam, his mind closed against the knowledge that only Blue and Loye knew he had been near Blue's cabin yesterday and against the memory, too, that Meade McIntosh had said that she had gone over to the enemy and that the enemy was Zan Alexander.

CHAPTER 4 Tender Treachery

The town was at the peak of the night's gaiety when Whitsitt loped into its crooked main street. He passed the infrequent blurs that were harness shops, blacksmith shops, general stores, drug store, express station, tannery, and livery stables, and the twenty-two small weathered buildings, that were the saloons and dancehalls of Red Rock, blazing with light and tinkling with music and roaring with laughter.

He came to the Silver Slipper. Like a wedge, Big Boy pushed in among the other horses at the hitchrack. Whitsitt leaped to the ground. He checked the looseness of his guns in their holsters and strode toward the swinging doors, below which he could see the booted legs of men from the copper mines, the flapping chaps of cowboys in off the range, and the occasional long, silk-covered legs of dancing girls. The piano clattered, *Sweet Genevieve.*

Jim Whitsitt bent and, catching the heels

of a man sprawled in drunken slumber across the walk, he dragged him over against the wall. When Whitsitt came out of the Slipper, he might come shooting; and he did not want anything in his way to stumble over.

The place was crowded. He pulled his hat low and wove his way in, hoping no one would recognize him as he searched for Blue. Before anything else happened, he had to see her.

He reached the back of the room and went down the wall to a cubbyhole under the stairs. Mitch Wiggans had fixed it up for Blue when she first came to town.

In the half-dark under the stairway, he bumped into her. She gasped with surprise as his hands closed warm and compelling on the long satin sleeves of her gown.

"Don't muss me, Jim," she implored. "I'm on next. How do I look?"

She drew away, her breath coming fast. Reluctantly, he released her, and she turned before him in the dim light that gleamed softly on the wide brown and gold stripes that began at her shoulders full width, tapered to her waist, and disappeared to swell to full width again over her hips and taper more slowly to her feet, hobbling them in a narrow width of cloth. The foam of fragile lace that sprayed out from her low-cut bodice and circled her hands, encasing each in a light puff of silver, made her look incredibly vital and feminine.

His hunger for her fumed up in him, clouding everything else. He stared at her and tried to remember the things he had to remember.

"Blue," he said hoarsely, "I've got to talk to you!"

"Not here," she protested. "Go upstairs —first room on the left. I'll be up when I'm done with my song."

Whitsitt lingered under the stairs, watching her. She walked between the tables leisurely. Necks craned, and greetings bubbled up as she passed. Men smirked and basked. Applause rolled in on itself and thundered. She reached the shallow stage, flushed and triumphant. While the man at the piano beat out a song for her, she talked with Mitch Wiggins, whose suave face, half hidden by mustache and goatee, nodded and smiled.

"Where Is My Wandering Boy Tonight?" The phrase came round and true from Blue's lips, which were wistful and softly red.

What she sang made no difference to Whitsitt. She was rhythm and light and laughter to him. She was life's melody and meaning. She was his dream and his reality.

When applause rose deafeningly from the crowd, Whitsitt took the steps two at a time. He wanted to be in the room, waiting for her when she came. He was going to compel the truth from her and compel the truth to be as he wanted it!

The door gave under his hand. A lamp with lowered wick burned on a table beside a bed. On the washstand, the bowl was turned bottom up beside the pitcher, and the towel on top of them was folded and clean. The room surprised him, it was so bare, with only the necessities and not the luxuries he would expect Mitch Wiggins to get together for Blue.

He tossed his hat on the bed and started toward the closet, looking for proof that he had entered the right room—but the hall door opened. Blue swept in, radiant with the approval that had been heaped on her. Harshly he put down his feeling that the eagerness with which she met him was frothy with effort, like a little beer in a big jug shaken until its quantity overflowed and hid the true volume.

He went to her with outstretched arms, and she slipped into them. With his cheek against her hair and the touch of her filling him with tingling well-being, he could not say the thing she had come to say.

"When will you marry me, Blue?" he begged.

She moved against him. "Whenever you say, Jim. But where'll you take me, Saddle-tramp?"

HE HELD her off and stared at her longingly. "I'm no saddle-tramp. I'm rich! I'm taking you to the Maltese Cross. You're going to live like a lady—have a cook and a hired girl. Maybe five years from now I'll be running for Congress and helping make the laws. We're going places, Blue!"

"Day dreamer!" she teased. "You haven't even got a horse!"

"Who says so?"

"My eyes," she answered. "You came home on foot, carrying your saddleroll. You threw it down on the porch and

dragged it into the house. Packing it all the way from Texas, I guess, made you feel funny without it?"

Caution plucked at Whitsitt and stopped the words that surged to his lips. Instead of telling her of his horse hidden in the choke-cherry and the gold in his saddleroll that he did not dare leave unguarded, he said, "You mean yesterday, when Karl and his boys killed Mike Thurlow?"

Her eyes widened. "Karl?" she repeated.

"Sure. You know him—Alexander's killer? What did they have against the kid?"

She stood still, her shoulder against his chest. She bit her lower lip with her white teeth, wonderingly.

"Why did they kill him?" he urged.

"Don't worry me, Jim!" she exclaimed. "I've got to think."

"They're trying to pin the shooting on me," he explained. "What do you know that I ought to know to straighten things out?"

She turned to him, throwing both arms about him—and Whitsitt felt reassured. McIntosh was wrong. So was Loye. Blue loved him!

"I don't know anything, Jim! Maybe you ought to get out of here—run for it . . . leave the country!"

"Me run?" he repeated grimly; and when still she clung to him, her eyes avoiding his, he asked, "What about you?"

"It's you I'm thinking about," she said, her voice soft with fear. "I'll be all right. No one's hanging anything on me." Her arms tightened about him. "Oh, Jim!" she whispered.

His head bent over hers. Try as he would, he could not keep his senses when she was near. He forced himself to say, "Folks been pouring it on me, Blue, saying you've thrown in with Alexander. I ain't believing them, but what would you do if I asked you to come into court and swear I was with you when Mike Thurlow got killed?"

Her head lifted from his chest. Her eyes met his and fell a little. Her glance went over his shoulder to the door behind him, and an expression he could not read slid over her face, whether it was surprise or fear or some emotion more raw and violent he could not tell—but the next instant something crashed against the back of his head.

Shock zigzagged through him, throwing splintered purple and gold and yellow, jagged as lightning flashes, against his eyeballs. His hold on Blue faltered. He wavered to his knees and tipped sideways to the floor. Dimly, he heard her cry out, but her words were indistinguishable. Frantically, he struggled, and the color cleared from his eyes. He saw the three men who had killed Mike Thurlow on the hill before Blue's cabin. Karl was hefting the gun he had used to club Whitsitt. Blue! She was out of his range of vision. His hand groped for his gun. At the same time, he rolled behind the bed, shouting, "Run, honey! Clear out of here!"

Still he did not see her, but he heard guns roar, and one of them was the gun in his own hand.

The room rocked. Gunsmoke choked his throat and stung his eyes. One of the gunmen fled. One lay on the carpet in full view. Karl and Whitsitt were exchanging shot for shot. Neither could see the other in the grayness, for the light was out and only the powder flashes guided their shots.

Whitsitt emptied one of his guns and waited. No one was coming to his aid. He had walked into a trap.

The smoke lifted a little from the carpet. He saw a boot move in the shelter of the washstand. He groaned, putting all the agony he could into the sound. The foot moved again, showing more leg. He fired. A burbling cry answered; and a bullet raked across Whitsitt's head, ripping and burning and throwing him violently against the frame of the iron bed. Dizzily, he sank into darkness.

How long he was out of the world, he did not know. He supposed it was a matter of minutes, but the lamp on the washstand was still out. The room was filled with a smoky half light that came through an unshaded window. He struggled to his knees and searched the gloom for Karl. Karl and one of the gunmen lay where Whitsitt's shots had felled them. They were both dead. Otherwise the room was empty.

He got uncertainly to his feet. Blood oozed slowly from the crease above his left ear. The welt on the right side where his head hit the bedstead lifted under the scalp in a ridge. He wavered across the room to

the window. The drop to the ground was not far. He would land in an alley. That was what he wanted. He would never be able to leave the Silver Slipper by the stairway and the front door, and he had to make sure about Blue.

Without hesitation, he straddled the windowsill and, letting himself hang full length, he dropped.

BLUE had left the Silver Slipper. Boozy Butterfield, who staggered out carrying so much from the bar that he could not get into his saddle, was not too far gone to verify the fact.

"Sure I saw her," he mumbled, thrusting a tireless but inept boot at his stirrup. "Ain't no use that little gal trying to slide out unbeknownst. When she goes, the show's over. So I'm hitting for home if I can get atop this hoss."

"I'll give you a hand," Whitsitt offered. "But tell me first, is Zan Alexander in there? Or the sheriff?"

Boozy Butterfield threw him a cock-eyed glance while he clung to stirrup leather and swayed on one foot.

"You a friend of Alexander?" he burbled.

"No," said Whitsitt. "What about them?"

"I thought you was Alexander's friend—you calling him Zan that way. But I reckon I was wrong. You're Jim Whitsitt. Good old Jim! You'll give me a hand."

"First," Whitsitt insisted patiently, "tell me about Alexander and the sheriff."

"The sheriff's there. He was going to take me in. This doggone stirrup's broke smack in the middle. My foot goes plumb through it."

"What about Alexander?"

"Ain't I told you?" Boozy asked, mystified. "Well, you can take it from me he ain't there. If he was, you and me wouldn't be here. We'd be out there in the road, kicking—put plumb out by polecat juice."

Bending to cup his hand sent pain through Whitsitt's head again. Slowly and carefully he hoisted; and, when at last he got Boozy into his saddle, the man sat there weaving and rocking uncertainly. Whitsitt turned away. Boozy was a good old boy, he told himself regretfully, but he had more to do this night than shepherd a drunk back to the Lazy M.

He made his way unsteadily down the hitchrack to Big Boy. Knotting the reins over his arm, he stumped awkwardly along the road toward Blue's cabin. Walking might clear his head and steady his nerves. He had to get the color out of his eyes before he met Alexander, and he had to know that Blue was safe.

He blinked at the ground. There was no use bending to make sure whether or not the thing on the bush was a tatter of her striped gown. Whatever it was, he would go to her cabin just the same. He had to find Blue.

He stumbled into a thicket and ground tied Big Boy. A horse was a hindrance to a man on foot.

He caught a glimmer of light from her cabin. The front door was open. She was at home, and she was not afraid.

His foot struck a half-buried rock, and he fell to his knees. He crawled. Like a baby, he thought bitterly. But he was too tired to try to get up. Something sobbed in his ears, long and loud. It was his own breath squeezing from his lungs and catching in his throat because it was swollen and aching.

It seemed like hours before he dragged himself close enough to the cabin to see through the door. What he saw shocked him to tingling attention. He had to catch the words they were saying in there—Blue and Loye. If he could not hear them, he could never understand how those two women came to be there, talking.

They were both standing. Blue looked angry and frightened. Loye's back was to the door that opened onto the stone side porch. She had in her hand the small, pearl-handled revolver she usually carried in a holster when she left the ranch on horseback.

Blue stood with her back to the door that led into her bedroom. "You ain't welcome, Miss High-and-Mighty," Blue shrilled at Loye. "You ain't never been here before, and I don't see why you come now."

"I told you," said Loye, her voice firm and quiet, "I came because of Jim."

"I don't see why you think he'd be here," Blue protested fiercely. "He ain't nothing to me, and I ain't nothing to him."

"He may be nothing to you," said Loye, "but he was headed for you when he left the ranch. He's in that room behind you!"

"If he was there," said Blue, waxing more angry and tense, "he wouldn't welcome you any!"

"I'm not going until I see him," Loye maintained, "whether he wants to see me or not."

Blue was plainly at a loss what to do. She moistened her lips, that were no longer pensive and temptingly red. Now they looked hard and uncertain.

"If I told you who was here and it wasn't Jim Whitsitt, would you go?" she asked.

"If I believed you, yes," said Loye.

Blue hedged. "Jim," she blurted desperately, "was in a gun fight at the Silver Slipper. I hope they're carting him out to the Lazy M by now. He ain't made me nothing but trouble since he got back."

Silence fell in the little parlor, and Jim Whitsitt writhed with the knowledge that he had built his world on the wrong foundation and it was toppling before his eyes.

"Ain't you going?" Blue demanded.

"I'm waiting to see who's in that room," said Loye. "But I'm not waiting much longer."

"You don't believe me?" cried Blue.

"I don't believe any one'll ever get the drop on Jim. Besides, if it was like you said, the boys from the ranch are combing the town for him, and I'd had news by now."

"So it was your idea coming here!" Blue accused her. "You love him, and you're jealous!"

Loye's face drained of its color. She lifted her head proudly.

While Whitsitt struggled to gain his feet, Blue poured a stream of vindictive words: "Let me tell you, if Jim Whitsitt was to crawl up that hill on his hands and knees and beg me to let him in, I'd kick him in the teeth. He talks about making a lady of me! Giving me a cook and a hired girl and the Maltese Cross! I'm telling you Zan Alexander's got the Cross, and he ain't letting it go. I'm telling you—"

Blue was edging away from the bedroom, edging toward Loye; but it was not fear for what Blue would do that made Whitsitt fight for his feet, swaying, dizzy with the effort. In anything like an even struggle between them, he knew that Loye could hold her own; but a man was emerging from the shadows behind Loye.

FIRST his dark face came out of the night, disembodied, like a magic lantern. Then his long arm swept forward, circled her from behind so tight that he could seize the revolver in her grasp with his other hand.

Blue screamed. "Thank heavens you made it out the window, Zan! That hellcat was going to shoot me. You heard what she said. And you heard me tell her Jim Whitsitt's a sneaking yellow coyote!"

She stopped, gasping for breath. While Jim still wavered in the outer dark, he saw Alexander drop Loye's revolver into his own coat pocket. He saw him swing Loye violently toward him, draw her close, and force her mouth to his. Then he held Loye off. He looked down at her and laughed

Blue gaped, a look of utter bewilderment and misery on her face.

"You're just as sweet as I thought you'd be," Alexander gloated. "And you can stick to a man! Blue thinks she's made a fool of me, just because I built her a porch and had them dig her a cistern; but I tallied her one on Mike Thurlow she won't forget. Jim Whitsitt, too. But I ain't interested in her two-timing right now. You're coming with me, Spitfire!"

Whitsitt took a deep breath and lunged forward. Loye was struggling against Alexander but he was drawing her slowly backward in spite of all she could do.

Strength swelled in Whitsitt. His sight cleared; and he roared, "Alexander, I'm coming! Shooting!"

He heard Blue shriek with terror. Loye made no sound. She redoubled her efforts; but Alexander kept his hold. With one arm, he held her close, shielding his body with hers while his other hand fumbled for his gun, awkward because her struggles hampered him.

Whitsitt could not shoot. Even though Alexander was much bigger and broader than Loye and her smaller stature could not hide all of him, the risk in shooting was too great until he could get her out of danger.

He stepped into the room, calling: "Duck, Loye! Duck!"

She could not duck; and, when at last Alexander's gun was in his hand he taunted, "You're not going to try to rush me, Whitsitt?"

Loye must have felt the tensing in the big body so close to her own; for she writhed around and reached for the muzzle of his gun, so desperate and so swift that the heel of her hand covered the mouth as she shoved the barrel violently upward and sent the shot wild over Whitsitt's head.

Alexander hurled her from him. He tried to brace himself against Whitsitt's onrush, tried to throw another shot before Whitsitt could cover the shallow space between them; but he could not. They locked with a violence that shook the cabin.

Whitsitt felt such triumph and such hate that he dropped his own gun and kicked it aside, heard it grate over the floor to the corner of the room where Loye waited. His fingers closed on Alexander's wrist, below the gun he was trying to bring low enough for another shot.

Alexander's body strained against him as he drew down on his gun. He gouged first one knee and then the other into Whitsitt's stomach; and Whitsitt did not seem able to hold him close enough to stop him. Whitsitt changed his tactics. Inch by inch he let Alexander bring his gun down until it was level with their shoulders. Violently, Whitsitt lunged forward, bearing down with all his strength on Alexander's arm, twisting it sharply backward. The forearm snapped. The man shrieked with pain. Whitsitt threw him from him.

Alexander stumbled backward, unable to catch his balance. He hurtled through the doorway and fell heavily to the floor of the stone porch he had built for Blue.

Whitsitt dived through the door after him; but, as his hands reached for Alexander's throat, he realized that the body beneath him was limp and unconscious.

Whitsitt lifted himself slowly.

From somewhere a crowd had gathered —men from the Lazy M. Smitty had him by the arm, helping him. From the back of the crowd, Dr. Byers was pushing forward. He glanced at Whitsitt and knelt beside Alexander.

Whitsitt was feeling dizzy again, but he heard Dr. Byers say, "Nothing I can do here. Broke his neck on this rock. Where's the young lady? Loye!"

Loye? What had happened to Loye?

Whitsitt jerked away from Smitty. He shouldered his way through the Lazy M riders. In the corner, he saw Loye. Boozy Butterfield was standing over her crying. His big fist circled her wrist, a tourniquet of flesh and bone to stop that blood that streamed down the heel of her hand where Alexander's shot had torn through.

"Loye! Oh, Loye!" Whitsitt cried, stumbling toward her. "Why did you do it?"

"You did more for me," she answered brokenly; for her breath was short with pain; but she smiled up at him bravely. "Maybe, Jim, if you hurry, you can catch Blue at the Slipper. She thought Alexander was going to kill you. She was afraid he'd kill her, too. She's trying to leave town!"

Whitsitt smiled wanly. He said to Boozy Butterfield, "Go into the bedroom and do your crying. I don't want the fellows to see you making a fool of yourself."

Boozy Butterfield glared at him. "You'd ought to be crying yourself! Getting Miss Loye into this! You'd ought—"

Whitsitt shouldered him away. His hand closed on Loye's wrist. Dr. Byers was opening his medicine kit and making ready to dress her wound.

"Don't you do any worrying about Blue," Whitsitt said softly. "I'm not. I'm sticking with you till the day I die—if you'll let me, Loye."

Her eyes lifted to his. With a sigh she leaned her head against his shoulder. "I couldn't help letting you, Jim."

THE END

CALL ME BOSTON

Boston enjoyed the mad chase —every minute of it.

Boston Crane, Nebraska sodbuster, had a hankering to be a judge—even if he had to go to Harvard by way of California to reach his goal.

★ ★

By JHAN ROBBINS

ON THE day Ev Crane was 21, half of Nebraska heard about it. For ten years, settlers in the prairie town of Deevers had looked for an explosion between the towheaded youngster who wanted to study law, and his black-browed father who tried to tie him to the plow. But when it came, the town of Deevers was nearly shaken from the map.

Abner Crane thought that forty turned acres and a new sod house made a pretty nice birthday present for his son. When Ev

had pleaded, instead, to be sent East for a year at Harvard University, the father put it down to the wild and foolish notions of youth. After all, Ev was married, and ought to be raising a farm and a family.

At the thought of Betsy, Ev's slender little wife, Abner stopped his contented rocking and frowned heavily. There was nothing wrong with his new daughter-in-law. Nothing, really, except that she liked Ev too much. If Betsy ever put her foot down, Abner's worries would be over. But instead, she backed her husband stoutly in his burning desire to get to Boston, a city Ev regarded as the seat of all culture and learning.

Today, neither of the two ingrates had so much as thanked him for the generous gift. Ev had flushed a dull red, hoisted Betsy up before him on his fleet horse, and set off to inspect his new abode.

What he thought of it, Abner was not long in finding out. As dusk fell over the prairie, the horizon was lit up by a blinding flash and a dull roar. Abner's feet hit the floor by the widow just in time for him to see the pieces of his son's new sod house falling back to earth. Out of the dust cloud raised by the blast of dynamite came the figure of a horse, racing hard, carrying double, headed East, straight for the city of Boston. Ev would not be a farmer, after all.

In later years, Evett Crane, then Judge Crane, defended his destruction of the sod hut with these words: "My father was a good man, but he had a very thick skull. Only dynamite could blast a path through it for a new idea."

But St. Joseph, Missouri, was a close as Ev ever got to Harvard University. There, despite Betsy's careful managing, their money gave out. On April 3, 1860, the two walked slowly down the streets of the town that was the jumping off place for westward travelers, and considered ways and means. A poster caught Betsy's eye.

"What's the Pony Express?" she queried. Minutes later, Ev was mounted on a long-legged, deep-chested four-year-old, demonstrating to the hiring agent at the Express office the wild, Indian-style riding that used to set Abner Crane's teeth on edge during the corn-planting season.

"You'll do, boy," said the agent. "What's your name?"

Ev hesitated. His father might be just angry enough over the explosion to send a sheriff after him. Finally, he muttered, "Call me Boston."

"Is that your name?"

"Yeah—just Boston."

And that's how Ev Crane was entered on the payroll of the Pony Express. Signed up for the dangerous Sierra run, the third lap on the way West, his trail lead through dangerous country, crawling with redskins and outlaws. But the heavily-financed Pony Express was willing to pay him $150 a month, and for the amount "Boston" was willing to risk his scalp.

More than that, he seemed to think that he was getting paid to take risks. While Betsy stayed in St. Joseph and prayed, the rider known as Boston began to burn up the Sierra trail in a sensational series of daring rides.

On the dead run, no one could catch him. Although slightly larger and heavier than the average Express rider, his horsemanship was remarkable. He used a saddle no larger than a postage stamp, and he rode like the Sioux in his native Nebraska, without stirrup or halter. He fairly flew along.

Asked the secret of his speed, he answered, "The horse doesn't even know I'm up there."

Once a band of Arapahoes chased him for fifteen miles. Boston enjoyed the mad chase —every minute of it. But the savages found their defeat too humiliating to risk repeating. The next time Boston went loping through their hunting grounds, the Indians surveyed him solemnly from a hilltop, but made no move to pursue. Disappointed, the rider reined in, twisted in his saddle, and deliberately applied the tip of his thumb to his nose and wiggled his fingers at the reluctant redskins. The gesture produced results, and he was in sight of a strongly fortified mountain settlement before the outraged Arapahoes stopped whooping at his heels.

Despite the fact that he was headed West when his goal lay in the East, Boston never lost his consuming interest in higher education. He sent away for a set of textbooks and studied mathematics and history. When he came across a problem or a point that passed his understanding, he wrote it to Betsy, who transmitted the letter to a schoolmarm in St. Joseph, and reported the correct answer by return mail.

Once Boston sat up all night awaiting a rider who was supposed to bring in a letter solving a complicated problem in geometry. But the letter was in one of the few pouches that were lost to a masked highwayman. The Express rider limped in, wounded, five hours late, to tell the story of the robbery.

The hold-up man, Boston learned, was undoubtedly part of a gang of four brothers named Dobbs who last month had held up the slow, lumbering overland stage and made off with $3000 in jewels and money. They were heavily armed and nervous. The stage driver had been killed instantly and the Express rider shot in the back without warning.

Boston, determined to recover the missing mathematics lesson, looked around for a horse. His mount was necessarily reserved for the route, but the other rider's winded animal stood heaving in the corral and soon the sample-sized saddle was cinched on its back. Slowly, the foam-flecked horse and its boiling-mad rider limped back along the bloody trail. Boston carried no gun, but in his hip pocket was flint and steel—and a stick of dynamite.

This time, no one heard the explosion. Boston returned five hours later, holding the missing mail pouch in one hand and his mathematics lesson in the other. The fragments of the Dobbs brothers were found the following spring, when the snow ran out of a shallow gulch.

BUT by that time, the Pony Express was getting ready to shut up shop. The Civil War was as good as started, and the investors who had seen a gold mine in the Express in days of peace were pulling out as rapidly as they could, before armies locked in battle closed the route completely. The chatter of the telegraph, too, was drawing closer to the frontier, and the electric impulses that flew over the copper wires outdistanced even Boston and his barrel-chested horse.

In October, 1861, the would-be lawyer delivered his last mail pouch to Sacramento and found myself out of a job, 3000 miles from Harvard and Boston. Once more, the thrifty and loyal Betsy pointed the way. Painfully working down the printed columns of a newspaper page, her stubby finger found an unfamiliar word.

"In-s-u-r-a-n-c-e salesman wanted," she spelled out. "What's insurance, Ev?" Ev hadn't the slightest idea, but with his thirst for information he was not long in finding out. In response to his letter of inquiry, the postmaster handed him a flat brown package containing a bundle of printed forms called policies, accompanied by a long business letter. After studying them carefully, Boston decided, "An insurance company is something like a big gambling house, except that they're dudes. You bet them that you won't die before you're fifty, and if you do, you win. See, Betsy?"

"You mean, as long as you live, you lose?" she asked in horrified accents. "I won't hear of you doing any such thing!"

"Oh, I don't do any chancing, Betsy," Boston assured her. "I just hold the stakes and take my cut."

Under Boston's persuasive salesmanship, Sacramento went insurance wild. According to the records of the old Brown and Haswell Co., which sold many of the first policies West of the Mississippi, 78 per cent of the adult male inhabitants were covered, a record in salesmanship that has never since been broken.

Then it happened. A long-standing feud between mountain prospectors and the placer miners in the valley flared into the open. War broke out in Sacramento.

Shouldering their heavy, old-fashioned muskets, the invading prospectors barricaded themselves in the town square. At the end of the day-long skirmish, fifteen citizens of Sacramento were dead. All were heavily insured. By the time Messrs. Brown and Haswell had recovered from their indignation sufficiently to pay off on $30,000's worth of policies, Boston Crane was again unemployed.

This time he was discouraged. "Guess I'll never get to Harvard now," he mourned, telling his troubles to Mayor Edward L. Sutton.

"Why d'ye want ter go there, anyhow?" His Honor asked, not unsympathetically.

"I always wanted to be a lawyer," Boston confided, "so I could someday be a judge. I've a hankering for justice."

"Why, don't you worry another minute," said the Mayor, patting him kindly between the shoulder blades. "You don't have to be a Harvard-graduated man to be a judge. I'll appoint you a judge."

(Please continue on page 97)

BETTER FOG, COWBOY! ★ ★

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Suddenly the door opened and two men came into the room. . . .

THE WOUND in his side kept him in bed three weeks, and it was another two weeks before he was strong enough to saddle and ride. Al Parsons, at whose ranch he had stayed during this period, didn't see any point in his moving on. Parsons could use another man on the ranch and had offered him the job.

"You'd like it as well here, Bill, as over in the Wind River country," Parsons insisted. "Why not give it a try?"

Bill Abby managed a grin which softened the lines around his mouth and modified the hard, direct look in his eyes. "Maybe I'll come back after I've been over there a while," he said slowly. "I'll almost promise to come back one of these days."

Parsons had sold him a horse and saddle, and he was mounted and ready to leave. He lifted his hand in a farewell salute to the rancher and waved to Mrs. Parsons who was standing on the porch. He felt a strange thickness in his throat. He knew he could

On the trail of two black-bearded holdup artists, Cowpuncher Bill Abby ventured into the forbidden city of the Mormons—and found more than his stolen watch.

never repay these people for what they had done for him. He really meant to come back sometime.

A short ride took him to the road which ran westward through these rolling hills toward the distant mountains. A little ways along it he came to the place where the stage had been held up five weeks before and where he had been injured. He paused there for a time, dark memories crowding in on him. The two men who had held up the stage hadn't been caught, weren't positively known, but the sheriff, in what he had said during his several visits to the Parsons' ranch, and Al Parsons, himself, had told Bill Abby more than either of them suspected.

To have gone to Tiffany and the Wind River Valley, Bill Abby would have had to follow this road. Instead, he left it and angled northward through the rolling hills. This was a grass-rich country and some day, when men better learned how to pull water out of the ground, it would be dotted with cattle and ranch houses. Now, the cattle ranches kept close to running streams and cattle didn't stray too far distant. All that day Bill Abby saw no one and from noon on, he saw no cattle at all. He made a dry camp that night, somewhere far north of the Tiffany road and at dawn was again on his way. Two hours later he came to a road running west and north. He followed this road for an hour and finally, from the crest of a hill, he looked down on a cluster of buildings, edged on a broad, tree-lined creek.

This, he knew, was Saugus, a forbidden town to men like him—and to most men in this part of the country. The sheriff had mentioned Saugus and Al Parsons had talked of it. "It's supposed to be a Mormon settlement," the sheriff had said, "It was started a couple years ago by some folks who were headed west to the Mormon country over the Rockies. They were just going to stay on the creek through the winter, but come spring they didn't move on. This spring they didn't move on, either. Maybe they're never going to move on until we chase ' em out of here. We're going to have to do that, too."

The sheriff went on to explain what he meant. Some of his charges weren't very clear, but it was apparent that the people in Saugus would have nothing to do with anyone else around here. Visitors weren't welcomed, were even ordered out of town. Several men who had gone there had received pretty rough treatment. Al Parsons, who had lost some cattle the year before, was confident the Mormons had driven them off. Several hints dropped by the sheriff indicated he felt that the men who had held up the stage were from Saugus, but that to try to prove it was hopeless.

Bill Abby rode slowly down toward the town. It looked to him like no temporary camp. There were planted fields along the creek and the buildings, many of them, were of log or of sawed board construction. A good many of the wagons the people had come here in were still in use on the far side of the town. There was a large building which ran along the side of the main street. This, Bill figured, was their church. He didn't know much about Mormons. He had heard, mainly, that the men had numerous wives and that Mormons were 'peculiar,' but he wasn't sure just what that meant.

If he had had any doubts, however, about the unfriendliness of the men of this town to strangers, those doubts were dispelled as he came to the head of the main street and started down it. Men flooded out of the store buildings to stare at him in a watchful silence. Most of them were bearded and middle aged, or older. He saw no young men or women and no children.

AT THE end of the building which Bill had figured was the church, he reined up and looked over his shoulder. The men he had passed were moving up the street toward him, coming in a body. More were joining them all the time. The uneasiness which he felt suddenly deepened. These men seemed to wear no guns. They carried no rifles. Yet there was a menace in the very way they walked and in the sharpness of the way they looked at him.

Bill Abby sat quietly on his horse, waiting. He was a young man, thin, tall, and square shouldered. He hoped that his face didn't show the anxiety he felt. He took off his hat and hooked it over the saddle horn and looked around at these men who had now come up and were circling him. He didn't see a smile anywhere.

"This must be Saugus," he said finally. "I was told you would greet me like this."

A stoop-shouldered man who had grey streaks in his beard and whose hair was almost white, stepped forward. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

Bill shrugged. "Why nothing. I just came here, that's all."

"Then you can ride on."

"My horse is tired and I was wounded not long ago. I need to rest a while."

"You can ride on," the man repeated. "We harbor no spies or men from an un-Godly world."

"You accept no converts?"

"Are you a convert?"

"Not yet."

"Then you can ride on."

Another man stepped forward, a black-bearded fellow with a scowling face. "He seems pale, Brother Talon," this man said slowly, and his voice was very mild. "Perhaps he needs a rest. He can stay at my home until evening."

"You were ever anxious for trouble, John Hall," said the white-haired man.

"I vote he leaves now," said a third man.

John Hall shook his head. "He shall leave tonight or in the morning. I will be responsible."

"You are a fool," Talon said bluntly.

"Perhaps."

"What is your name?" Talon asked, looking up at Bill. "What is your name and where are you from?"

Bill gave his name and the minute he did it he knew he had made a mistake, if the suspicions which brought him here had any foundation in fact. He said that he was from Kansas.

"If John Hall wishes you to remain at his home until this evening," said Talon, "you may. It is his responsibility. By tomorrow, you will be gone."

There were those in the crowd who didn't like this decision. Bill could read it in their faces, in the dark way they looked at him. Here and there men were talking together in low tones as they watched him. John Hall reached for the bridle of his horse. "I live this way," he said in his strangely mild voice. "Come, I will show you."

John Hall lived in a log cabin which was curtained by blankets into three parts. There were two women in the cabin, one who was about Hall's age and one who was hardly more than a child. Bill wondered if both of them were married to John Hall and a scowl came over his youthful face.

"My wife, Selina," said John Hall, indicating the older woman. "And my daughter, Naomi."

Neither of the woman did more than nod. Hall's wife, who was busy at the stove, gave Bill only a glance. Naomi looked up from her sewing and then looked down. She was thin and had startlingly large, dark eyes. Bill guessed she was sixteen or seventeen.

"You sit down over there," Hall went on. "We'll have dinner pretty soon and then we'll talk."

Bill Abby was never to forget that afternoon or the talk he had with John Hall. He heard the story of the Mormons, of Joseph Smith's trials and persecutions and of the journey of his followers across these plains to a place of freedom beyond the mountains. He heard of the great new city which was being built and of the aspirations of the men who were building it.

"We are the most misunderstood people in the world," said John Hall. "We claim the right to believe and worship as we wish but it has been denied us. We are treated as enemies by those who should be our friends. We are suspicious of any man who comes here because none has ever come in friendship. Brother Talon, who is a prophet and one of our leaders, has been beaten as was Joseph Smith. There are others among us who have suffered physical torture."

THIS WAS a strange story to hear. Bill looked again and again at the man who was talking, a man whose voice and words were as soft as a woman's but whose face looked fierce, almost brutal.

"Are all men here as you are, Hall?" he asked finally. "Are all as deeply religious?"

"All are Mormon," John Hall answered.

"Five weeks ago," Bill said suddenly, "the stage on the road between Longacre and Tiffany was held up by two heavy-set, black-bearded men. All on it were robbed. My money in my boot wasn't found, but my watch was taken. It was a watch given me by my father. I was shot by one of the men. They weren't caught. I was told that they were probably men from Saugus."

"Typical of the lies which men tell about us," Hall answered.

"The watch," Bill went on, "was gold. There was engraving on the case and inside the cover were the words: *To Wm. A. Ab-*

by, from his loving wife, Martha. Martha was my mother."

John Hall got to his feet. "You came here because of that?"

"I thought a great deal of the watch."

John Hall scowled. "You should not have told me. Wait here in my cabin until I return."

The women had gone somewhere and Bill and John Hall had been alone in the cabin. After Hall left, Bill Abby paced thoughtfully back and forth across the packed earth floor. He had told John Hall his story because he liked the man and felt he could trust him. He had told his story because there seemed to be nothing else he could do here in Saugus. He could never positively identify the two black-bearded men who had held up the stage. Too many men here wore black beards and were short and heavy. And no one would be ready to believe or even listen to the vague accusations of an outsider.

A half an hour passed and then an hour. Suddenly the door opened and two men came into the room, two black-bearded men who were short and thick bodied. One of them had an ugly scowl on his face and was breathing heavily as though he had been hurrying. The other man was narrow eyed and watchful. Both of them covered him with their guns.

"Hall's coming back for you in a minute," said the man with the scowl. "They are calling a meeting of the elders and are going to ask you questions. If you go to that meeting you will never leave here alive. Get on your horse and get out of town while you have a chance."

Bill Abby moistened his lips. These were the two men. He could be sure of it by what they said. These two had held up the stage coach. One of them had shot him. And it was clear, now, where John Hall had gone and why. He had recognized the description of the watch and had gone to see the man he called Brother Talon to arrange some sort of a meeting.

"You heard me," said the man who was doing all the talking. "Get out of here while you can."

"What about my watch?" Bill asked.

"Give it to him, Othman," the man ordered.

The other fellow dug into his pocket and pulled out Bill's watch. He tossed it to Bill and Bill caught it. "Get out of here," he said bluntly. "And get out fast."

"There were other things taken from other passengers on the stagecoach."

"But that's all that's yours. Take it and ride."

Bill glanced at the watch. He dropped it into his pocket.

"We'd better leave, Rudd, before Hall gets back here," Othman said under his breath. "If this fellow doesn't play it wise, we can take care of him."

Rudd nodded. He backed to the door and opened it. Othman looked outside, then disappeared. Rudd's hard, black eyes studied Bill Abby's face. "You've got your watch," he said grimly. "You've got what you came after. Better fog, cowboy."

He stepped outside, closed the door and was gone.

Bill Abby mopped a hand over his face. It came away moist with perspiration. He took out the watch and looked at it and held it to his ear and smiled briefly at the sound of the ticking. Then, as the back door to the cabin opened he jerked that way, his hand dropping to his gun.

Naomi looked in. She beckoned him toward her. A flush of excitement was in her cheeks.

"Your horse is ready, saddled," she whispered. "But don't trust them. Don't stop tonight. They'll be after you."

"Then you heard what they said?" Bill asked.

The girl nodded. "I was here at the door. I heard them."

"They are the two men who held up the stage."

"And they've done many more things like that," said the girl, and her voice showed a strain of anger. "They're not Mormons, real Mormons. They're just using us. They are gone sometimes for a week at a time, and they come back drunk and with lots of money. They—you'd better hurry."

Bill Abby frowned. "Why do you put up with them?"

"You'd better hurry."

"Maybe I should go to the meeting."

"No. Here comes my father. Please hurry!"

The girl turned away and after a momentary hesitation, Bill Abby went back to his chair and sat down.

John Hall's broad shoulders were sagging when he came back into the room and there was a tired look on his face. "That watch," he said slowly, "tell me again the writing inside the case."

Bill drew the watch from his pocket. "I can show you."

"But how—? He brought it here, didn't he."

"A man named Othman. The other man was Rudd."

"Frank Othman and Sam Rudd. I've suspected them for a long time. They don't belong with us, Abby. The others in Saugus aren't like them. Why did Othman give you the watch?"

"He wanted me to leave town right away. He wanted me to stay away from some meeting."

"Perhaps you should."

Bill Abby shrugged his shoulders.

"I went to see Brother Talon. I told him your story, told him of the watch I knew Frank Othman carried. Brother Talon is a stubborn man. He will not like admitting to an outsider that some of our people are not true saints. He will not be disappointed if you leave. Others of the elders of Saugus will feel as he does."

"When is the meeting?" Bill Abby asked.

"In a few minutes. He is calling the elders now. Some of them work in the fields."

"Are Othman and Rudd part of the elders?"

"No, but Othman has been summoned."

"Is this your system of law?"

"We have little need for law. The book of Mormon is our guide. Our prophets and elders are our leaders. There have been others like Othman and Rudd who called themselves Mormons. They have been weeded out."

Bill Abby got to his feet. He walked to the window and stared out into the street. The wisest course for him to follow would be to leave. There was no question of that in his mind. He had his watch. He could go. And in time the people here who were earnest and sincere would take care of Rudd and Othman.

But it wasn't as simple as that. He couldn't walk out and leave John Hall to attend the meeting without him. He couldn't let Hall carry the burden of explaining his departure. This was something he had to see through to whatever the end might be. There wasn't any other course to follow.

"How soon should we leave for the meeting?" he asked bluntly.

"Now," Hall answered.

Bill turned away from the window. He saw John Hall standing over a box which stood against the side of the room and which he had just opened. From the box John Hall took a gun. He examined it briefly, then tucked it under the waistband of his trousers where it would be hidden by his coat.

The meeting hall was in one end of the building which Bill had called the church and which he was to hear referred to later as the temple. The meeting hall was large, but no more than twenty men were there when Bill and John Hall arrived. Brother Talon sat at a wide table with several other men. The rest of the men were across from the table in irregular rows of seats. Sam Rudd and Frank Othman sat together near the front and only glanced casually at Bill Abby when he came in.

Brother Talon was scowling. He had small, dark eyes buried deep in his head and shielded by bushy eyebrows. He had been talking to the man next to him, but he stopped when he saw Bill Abby.

"You will sit at the end of the table," John Hall whispered to Bill.

BILL NODDED and took his seat. He took the watch from his pocket and opened it and set it on the table in front of him. Brother Talon frowned at the watch and looked at Rudd and Othman. John Hall walked around to where Talon was sitting. He whispered to Talon for several minutes, then took a chair at the table. Talon cleared his throat.

"Bill Abby," he said, "who sits at the end of this table, claims that he was on a stage which was held up and robbed five weeks ago. He claims that his watch was stolen. Is that the watch, Abby?"

Bill Abby nodded. "This is the watch."

"If it was stolen how do you happen to have it?"

"It was returned to me a few minutes ago by the one who took it—Frank Othman."

Frank Othman jerked to his feet. "The man lies, Brother Talon. I had a similar watch which many of you have seen. I have lost it."

Brother Talon nodded his head. "That could be true. Have you anything more to say, Abby?"

"Yes, I have more to say," Bill Abby replied. "This watch is not all that was lost in the holdup. There were three women on the stage. From one of them the holdup men took a ruby ring and a gold heart circled by rubies, from another they took a gold chain with a gold pendant made to look like a book, and from the third they took a bracelet of gold with a green setting. Perhaps you have seen some of this jewelry."

There wasn't a sound in the room. Brother Talon was staring straight ahead, his face like a granite mask. Several of those at the table were looking at him. The other men in the room were motionless, and Bill could sense a sudden tension come over everyone. What had he said to cause it? Nothing. He had said nothing except to catalogue the jewelry which had been taken in the holdup. He had repeated only what the sheriff had told him about what was lost.

Brother Talon sucked in a long, slow breath. "I know nothing about such jewelry," he said abruptly, and his voice had the rasping sound of a file. "Lots of jewelry could look alike. Have you more to say, Abby?"

Bill Abby was aware of a sudden anger. This was no fair hearing. This was no hearing at all. He had hoped that in listing the jewelry taken in the holdup he might trap Othman and Rudd, for if Othman had kept the watch, he or Rudd might have given some of the jewelry to a wife or sweetheart. For a moment he had thought he had succeeded, but now he was being brushed off, dismissed.

"Yes, I have more to say," he answered bluntly. "If you folks are going to live in this country, you will have to get along with other people. If some of your men are no good, you will have to deal with them—or we will. I am leaving here but I am coming back. I am coming back with a sheriff and a warrant for the arrest of Othman and Rudd. And if any of you try to stop us, you'll have a first class war on your hands!"

"You may go, Abby," Brother Talon said harshly.

Bill Abby turned toward the door but was stopped by John Hall's voice.

"One moment, Abby," John Hall called. "The jewelry will be returned."

Bill Abby stopped and looked back toward the table but John Hall wasn't facing him. Hall was on his feet and was looking at Brother Talon. His face had a stern, harsh look.

"The jewelry will be returned," John Hall said again.

BROTHER TALON moistened his lips. His eyes circled the faces of those in this room. He shook his head, wearily. "I did not know it had been stolen," he said under his breath. "It must be returned. Yes, it must be returned, and those who took it must be punished."

Those words were hardly audible but Bill heard them, and Othman and Rudd did, too. Suddenly Othman and Rudd stood up.

"You were in on it, Talon," Othman shouted. "You were in on it. You don't go blaming us. Those jewels were the price of your silence."

Talon shook his head. "The guilty must be punished. I knew nothing. I—"

A gun seemed to jump into Othman's hand. The blast of it echoed throughout the room. Brother Talon's body jerked, then his head and shoulders dropped slowly to the table.

Othman jerked around and raced for the door, with Rudd following him. Most of those in the room seemed stunned, too stunned by what had happened to try to stop them. Bill angled quickly toward the door. He drew his gun and called, "Othman! Rudd!"

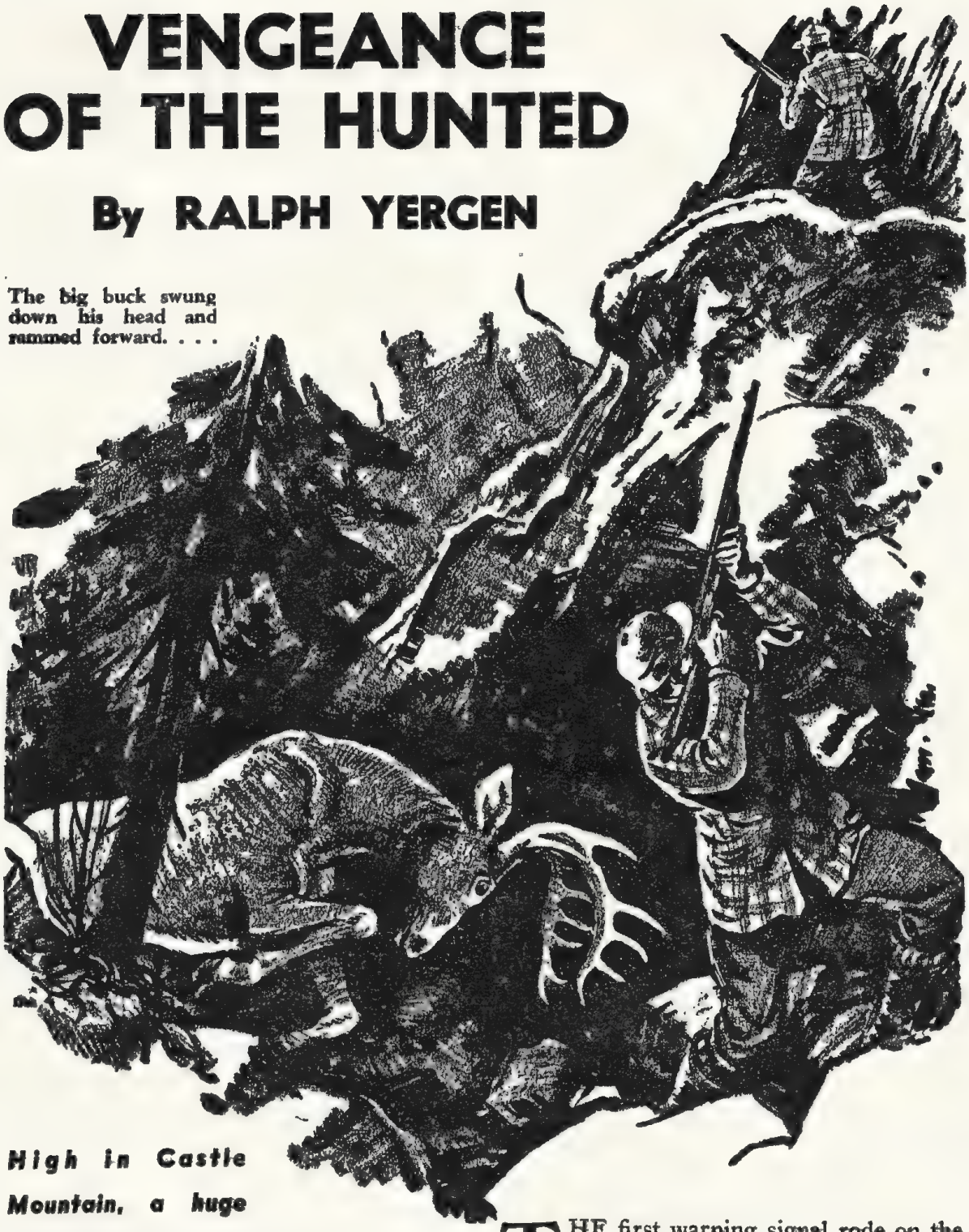
Othman jerked a look toward him, then swung up his gun and fired. Bill felt the bullet tug at the shoulder of his coat. He pulled the trigger of the gun he was holding and saw Othman trip and go down. Rudd was firing at him now, and pain knifed through the fleshy part of Bill's arm. He steadied his gun and fired back. Rudd was running on toward the door, but he was staggering, and as he came to the door his legs gave out. He fell against it and slid to the floor.

Bill made it to a chair and sat down. His arm was beginning to hurt, and again it was terribly still in the room. Othman lay where he had fallen and Rudd, too, was lying motionless, half against the door. Over at the

(Please continue on page 98)

VENGEANCE OF THE HUNTED

By RALPH YERGEN



The big buck swung down his head and rammed forward. . . .

High in Castle Mountain, a huge six-point deer sniffed the air for the deadly man-smell—while down in the draw the man-creatures he hated plotted death ...for one of their own kind.

THE first warning signal rode on the dawn breeze that came whispering through the mahogany. Spearfoot, the buck mule deer, lifted his rugged rack of horns and snorted softly. Like a painted picture he stood on the rocky promontory, every nerve alert, as the rising autumn sun flamed across the mountain.

Above his enormous ears, the smooth

polish of his six-point antlers glistened in the sunlight. His gray-brown coat blended with the hillside rocks. He poised, almost daintily, on hoofs as strong and sharp as chiseled flint.

A twig snapped, and the sound drove a shiver through him. And then his keen nostrils again picked up that faint scent of danger approaching from the edge of the green pine blanket that sloped to the west. It had been almost a year since the man-smell had penetrated Spearfoot's nostrils. But he remembered. Never had an autumn season passed without all too much of it permeating the forest and the Castle Mountain crags.

Spearfoot expelled his breath in a loud snort as he pivoted like a dancer. A single leap carried him thirty feet into the manzanita. He bounced high on rubbery legs between mahogany clumps. Something invisible shrilled past his ear like an angry wasp. Instantly a loud crash of thunder rocked the mountainside.

As the echoes faded into blue distance, Spearfoot heard the harsh sound of a man-voice behind him. Screened by the mahogany, he bounded toward the rising sun. Ahead of him stretched a gashed tangle of rocks and thickets, dominated by a barren pinnacle. But Spearfoot switched abruptly southward, downslope. An abrupt drop confronted him, and he sailed out into space.

On a sandy shelf he landed like a ghost. Without a pause he darted westward, threading a trail through huge, forbidding boulders that bulked in jumbled disarray beneath the shadow of the promontory above.

Many times Spearfoot had worked this exit trick, silently doubling back beneath the rim, almost under the feet of the man-creatures, while they were peering eastward trying to glimpse him through the thickets. Always it had carried him out of danger. For usually the man-creatures came straight up the mountainside from their camps in the draws that split the pine forest far below.

Spearfoot zoomed along the narrow, twisting trail among the giant boulders. He flashed across a thin strip of sunlight and glided into the pines. Along here, he would cross the trail of the man-creatures who had come up along the forest edge. Now he was behind them while they pushed blithely on towards the mountain's wind-honed crest.

When he had reached more secure footing, Spearfoot began those great, bounding leaps which carried him over the terrain with incredible speed and ease.. The light, muted sounds of his hooves thudded rhythmically on the soft woodland earth.

* * *

Deep within the green pine canopy, Spearfoot slowed to a trot. He brushed through a dense thicket of baby jacks, slapping the branches aside with quick, impulsive sweeps of his horns. Reaching another belt of age-old trees, he halted and nipped at a pesky tick.

The sun was prying through the branches, dusting the glossy manzanita and the bleached logs with mellow gold. The world was fresh and fragrant, with the drowsy music of the breeze in the treetops the only sound.

The man-creatures now seemed far away. Spearfoot pranced lightly, and rattled his horns against a ponderosa to test the strength of his sturdy neck. Soon would come the season when every stag of near equal size would challenge him along the trails. None possessed finer equipment for battle than Spearfoot. His forehooves could rip and gash like lances. His antlers were spread wide and pointed sharp, built to take and to break the powerful charges they would meet.

He had nibbled his fill of mahogany tips and manzanita leaves and rich grass blades during the night. But now he craved something special in the way of rare dessert. He drifted along to the largest pines, where a century-old carpet of rotting needles padded the ground. Here he sniffed for newly-sprouted mushrooms pushing upward toward the sunlight. His spade-like hooves stabbed the ground, and a whitish growth was revealed in the upturned earth. He munched the tender, tasty mushroom with relish and searched for more. . . .

AT THE camp in the draw, crimson fountains of firelight splashed over the features of the three men lounging before the tent. One was older than the others. His face was stern and lined, his eyes steel-blue. A thick shock of silvery hair covered his big, square head. His jaws worked systematically at a tobacco cud. Although he was saying the least, he seemed to be de-

riving the most enjoyment from the crackling flames.

Finally he spat a brown stream into the fire and asked: "How big was the buck you blazed at, Eben?"

The squat, fleshy-jowled man on the right swore roundly. "He was the biggest damned buck I ever saw, Judge. He had a rack on him like an elk. I just got a glimpse as he shoved off through the brush. Another half second, and I'd have downed him, too."

"I wish I'd gone up that way instead of following the draw," the judge said.

"We'll nail that old rounder tomorrow," Eben said. "No doubt he'll be back on that rock nose again in the morning. I spotted enough sign up there to prove he's been hanging around all summer. Right, Cliff?"

The third member, a nervous, black-mustached man with an elusive quality about his inky eyes, puffed on his cigarette before replying. "I saw plenty of his tracks. Four inches from tip to dew claws. I'd say he'd bring down two-fifty or better on the scales."

"Two-fifty, hell!" Eben scoffed. "He'd dress three hundred or I'm a damned liar."

The judge smiled. "Bankers are conservative. Lawyers are not. But since you are the banker, Eben, and Cliff is the lawyer, it makes me think the snakebite before supper sort of took hold."

"It's no hokum," Eben persisted. "I've never seen such a buck. If you bag him, Judge, it will be a feather in your cap as big as being re-elected by a landslide next month."

Judge Walton laughed. "Let's shoot the buck first, boys."

"Yeah," Eben grinned. "And the time to lay our plans is right now. I figure it this way. We'll close in on the stag from three sides. If he's on that knob, he can't get away without one of us getting a shot at him. Cliff, you're the best shot. You mosey up over those eastern cliffs and get on top of that rock spire which pokes up east of the buck's hang-out. He ran that direction this morning. Likely he will again. From the high rock you can spot him right below you when he goes galloping through the brush. It will take time to work your way over there, so you'd better start before daylight.

"About an hour later, the judge and I will climb straight up the hill. When we hit that rock projection, the judge can crawl right along the rim and maybe get a shot at him when he first jumps up. I'll close in from the timber to smear him if he happens to run out that way. We got that buck's liver as good as in the pan right now."

"Might as well start slicing the onions," the judge observed.

The lawyer flicked his cigarette into the fire and yawned widely. "Reckon I'll get me a drink at the creek and roll up if I have to amble out of here an hour before daylight."

He got up and threaded through a grassy space to the night-mantled stream. The next minute, the squat banker came waddling to his side.

"It's going to be easy," Eben whispered, darting a glance at the old judge seated motionless beside the fire. "He don't suspect a thing."

The lawyer grinned wolfishly. "Why should he? We're his best friends."

"He thinks so," the banker said. "And so does most of Kochuk County. We haven't played up to old Walton the last couple of years for nothing." Suddenly he laughed. "He'd call anybody a liar who said that young lawyer pal of his by the name of Cliff Zora had ideas about running for his job of Kochuk county judge!"

"And he'd be even more surprised if he knew a Kochuk Falls banker named Eben Swope had ideas of his own about how county affairs should be handled. But he won't ever know. Not with a rifle slug in his brisket."

The banker scooped up a cup of water, tossed it onto the rocks.

"Sure you got everything straight, Cliff?"

The lawyer's eyes glittered coldly in the starlight. "I'll get up before daylight and accidentally pick up Walton's 30-'06 Springfield instead of my own .300 Savage. Then, instead of climbing that pinnacle when I get up the mountain, I hide down under the rim of that knob where the buck keeps himself.

"You and the judge come up the mountain. And when the judge sneaks along the edge of the rim, I paste him with his own gun from the rocks below. Then I'll swap guns with him, so it will look like he

fell down the cliff and was killed when his gun went off accidentally."

"We'll be very sorry about it all," the banker nodded. "A few may have suspicions. But there'll be no evidence to shake our story. When next election comes up, one Cliff Zora will have clear sailing into the Kochuk County judgeship. And in a couple of years we'll both have all the cream in Kochuk County running right into our saucers."

DAWN again flamed over the mountainside, painting the frost-withered leaves a mad riot of color. Against the soft blue of the sky, a cawing raven made a shiny black mark. From a clump of silvery aspen, jays chorused in raucous cacophony. The mellow smell of autumn lay rich and heavy in the air. Castle Mountain seemed to belong to Nature alone. But Spearfoot, remembering yesterday, was on the alert.

Far down in the buff vastness that was Big Valley, the morning mists were rolling away. To the south toward Coyote Lake a flock of snow gesse formed a pointed white pattern on the horizon. Stirring from the northeast, a cool breeze played in the treetops. Spearfoot sniffed the clean air, and the man-smell was not in it.

Spearfoot might have been lulled into false security, then, if his keen ears had not picked up the sound. It was faint, a mere rasp, as of something brushing against a stiff mahogany twig. But it was not the sound of a deer or coyote, nor of a bird or bobcat. It was warning enough for Spearfoot, who wheeled like a rocket and went bounding through the mahogany, following the path of the previous morning. He expected to hear the crash of a thunder stick behind him, but it did not come.

Once the thickets had well concealed him, he turned and sprang over the rim; then began to double back along the broken base. Although he traveled at a fast run, no sound escaped his hooves. He followed his usual trail, darting between the boulders with the agility of a squirrel.

He glided around an enormous rock, and a sudden wave of fear washed through him. Blocking his trail, no more than his own length in front of him, was one of the dreaded man-creatures.

This man-creature was not looking at Spearfoot, nor did he appear to be aware of the deer's approach. He was pointing a long, stick-like object skyward, and his attention was centered in that direction. Spearfoot did not look up at the second man-creature prowling along the rim above. He was too frightened to look anywhere but straight ahead.

The dead air within the crevices at the rim's base had not carried the scent of the man far enough to warn Spearfoot. But now his nose was full of man-smell. He slowed for an instant, uncertain. It was too late to retreat, and this was his trail of escape. It was blocked. It must be opened. With a singleness of purpose that is mule instinct, the big buck swung down his head and rammed forward.

The shock of his horns meeting the man-creature's body did not even check his speed. Harsh, splitting thunder slammed like a wedge against the mountainside. Smoke stench filled Spearfoot's nostrils. Never had he been so frightened. He ran over the falling man creature, and he felt a sharp hoof slicing into something soft and spongy. The next minute, he was out of those danger-filled rocks and bounding into the shaded forest.

His hooves thudded softly on the pine carpet, then were lost in the stillness of the forest.

* * *

Judge Walton crawled warily down the cliff and approached the figure sprawled between the huge boulders. He halted, staring down at the crimson trickle on the sand, then at the motionless body of Cliff Zora. The lawyer would not hunt again. His throat had been ripped open by a hoof as sharp as a spearhead.

The judge suddenly bent and picked up his own .30-'06 army rifle from the rocks. The blue steel of his eyes tempered as he slammed the bolt, locking a fresh cartridge in the chamber. At a slight sound, he whirled about, the rifle muzzle in his hands trained on the sound.

"What in hell happened?" came the hoarse voice of Eben Swope. And then the banker himself appeared through the bushes, his face pale, his pudgy hands trembling on the stock of his Winchester carbine.

"That's what I'd like to know," the judge said. "I was working along the rim when all of a sudden a gun went off. A bullet screeched past my ear—not six inches

away. And then I found Zora down here run over and killed by a deer. But what was Zora doing down here in these rocks when he was supposed to be away over east on a stand?"

The banker stared at Zora with bulging eye whites. "I—I don't know. There must be some dreadful mistake. This is a horrible thing, Judge. I—"

Judge Walton's eyes settled on the pale banker, and his voice hardened. "Furthermore, Swope, why did Zora take my gun instead of his own this morning? Even if it was dark, he could hardly have mistaken a .30-'06 Springfield for a .300 Savage. It almost looks as if Zora was squatting down here to take a bushwhack shot at me—when that buck doubled back along this trail and busted into him." He eyed the sweating banker for a long minute. "What do you know about this, Swope?" he asked finally.

The banker gulped. "Nothing. I can't understand it."

"Maybe you'd understand better if you knew what Cliff Zora muttered before all the life ran out of him."

The banker's bloated jowls turned greenish. He started to speak, then closed up like a clam.

The judge's lips twisted into a flinty smile. "You think I'm bluffing, Swope? Better think twice. Your fat neck will get a mighty tight squeeze if I'm not, you *murderer!*"

A snaky light flickered in Eben Swope's eyes. His wrists jerked his rifle barrel upward in a swift movement. Flame slashed from the muzzle, and the harsh blast shattered the mountain hush.

The bellow of Judge Walton's old army gun heaped fresh sound upon the echoes. Swope's body seemed to shrivel. He settled into a crevice, his head lolled back to stare unseeingly into the blue October sky.

The judge looked down at the bullet rip in his right sleeve and drew a deep breath. Then he smiled suddenly and lifted his arm in a salute toward the trail the big deer had taken.

"Thanks, Pardner," he said softly. "I'd like to tell you I've gone on my last deer hunt, but you wouldn't understand. And I reckon you're a long way off by now and still splitting the breeze."

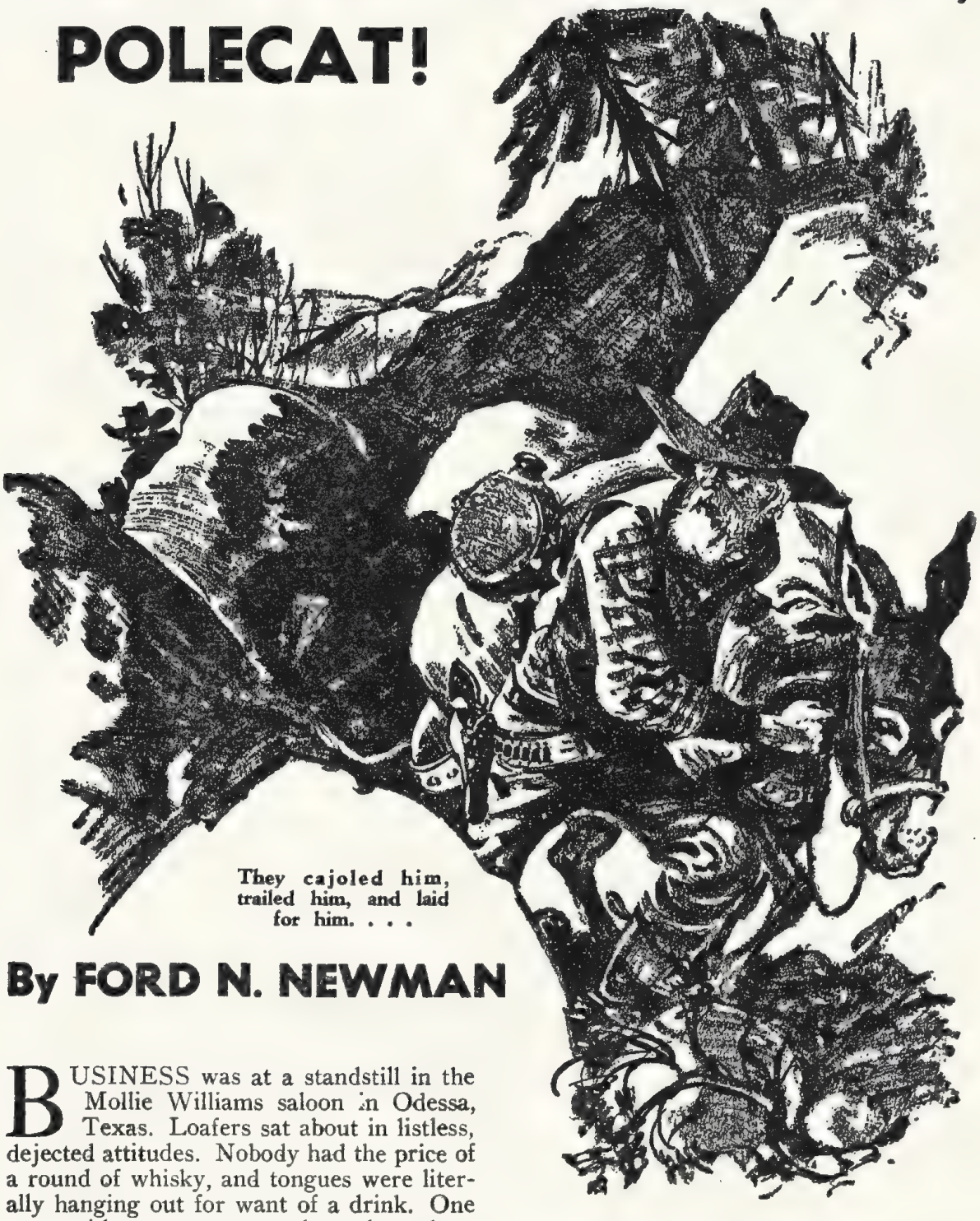
The judge was only half right. Spearfoot was a long way from the rocky rim, but he was no longer running. His skirmish with the man-creatures now only a memory, he was unconcernedly pawing for mushrooms.

MOVE OVER, MISSOURI!

The Missouri River, as unpredictable as a loco bronc, often changed its course. Here today and, for no apparent reason, yonder tomorrow. One man summed it up this way: "Of all the variable things in creation the most uncertain are the action of a jury, the state of a woman's mind, and the condition of the Missouri River." With which, in 1881, Charlie Keane, saloonkeeper, was in complete agreement. His saloon, on Cow Island, was on the Kansas side of the channel. Suddenly, the Missouri River decided to jump to a new bed. Keane found himself and his saloon in Missouri, where the sale of intoxicating liquors was illegal. He was arrested, tried and convicted. But he appealed—and won! His victory was duly celebrated by the local Missouri tipplers who now didn't have to bother crossing the river to Kansas in order to wet their whistles.

J.W.Q.

DIG YOUR OWN GOLD, POLECAT!



They cajoled him, trailed him, and laid for him. . . .

By FORD N. NEWMAN

Folks laughed at Old Ben, the "crazy prospector"—till he rolled into town bulging with gold . . . and a secret he never told.

BUSINESS was at a standstill in the Mollie Williams saloon in Odessa, Texas. Loafers sat about in listless, dejected attitudes. Nobody had the price of a round of whisky, and tongues were literally hanging out for want of a drink. One man with more energy than the others stood in the open door, squinting in the glare of the afternoon sun. Suddenly, he grinned. A rickety buckboard had pulled up across the street and a white-haired old man was climbing stiffly down. The man in the doorway turned and bellowed:

"Line-up, boys—here comes a live one!"

Several of the men rose and gaped at the figure limping into the saloon; they sank down again in disgust.

"Old Ben, the crazy prospector!" they groaned in unison.

Old Ben Sublett—William Colum Sublett was his correct name—strode straight to the bar, raised his hand, and invited everybody in the house to join him in a drink. The bartender was perplexed, skeptical, and downright suspicious. Some of the crowd grinned sourly; others scowled in disgust, and a few snickered. But, when Old Ben dumped a pouch full of nuggets on the bar, they went wild.

When they had lined up at the bar, Old Ben spoke up for all to hear.

"Boys," he said solemnly, "I've been damn poor in the past, but I ain't poor no more. I can buy out the Mollie Williams and have plenty left. Drink hearty!"

The boys drank. They applauded. They drank another round. Old Ben, flushed with success and brimming with goodwill, limped out to his rickety rig and returned with a small canvas sack bulging with gold —"gold pure enough to be hammered out by a jeweler."

"Boys," Old Ben, said again, and there was a hint of tears in his faded blue eyes, "drink all you can hold." He choked up for a moment. "I have finally found the richest gold mine in the world. I can put up a castle of marble and buy up the whole state of Texas for a backyard for my kids."

Old Ben never made good his boast, but he could have. But he had no wish to encumber himself with estates, or with riches either. What he loved was to bask in the public notoriety and fame that his secret brought him.

Old Ben had seen others strike it rich through the years, while he wore rags and his wife and children went hungry. His wife died from the hardship. After the death of his wife, Sublett and his children—two girls and a boy—wandered from place to place; Old Ben doing odd jobs just long enough to grubstake himself for another prospecting trip.

Eventually, he set up his tent on the outskirts of Odessa. Odessa was a raw frontier town consisting of a few saloons, a few women, and no churches. The oldest girl made a little something by taking in washing, and this, together with the fact that the neighbors were a charitable lot, gave Sublett a freer rein to prospect. Each time he returned from his periodic ventures, however, the people of the town tried to get him to settle down and take a steady job. But Old Ben was obstinate; he was playing a "hunch," he said—sooner or later he would find gold in the Guadalupes. They told him to stay away from the Guadalupes if he didn't want his scalp hanging from an Apache belt. Old Ben just laughed at them and went on to find his gold mine.

Now that he had found his gold, people spared no effort to get him to divulge his secret, but he just laughed at them.

"If you want my mine," he would say, sarcastically, "go out and hunt for it the same's I did. People have called me a fool, but I'll have the last laugh. When I die I'll take my secret with me!"

This persistent refusal was, of course, the signal for all concerned to shadow his every move. They cajoled him, trailed him, and laid for him, but to no avail. Old Ben avoided all traps and tricks with the cunning of a lobo wolf. He would leave town unexpectedly, camp on the Pecos a few days, and then slip out from camp sometime during the night. Sometimes he was gone for days, sometimes for months, but he always brought back around a thousand dollars worth of gold.

Once W. E. Connell, a banker, and George Gray, a rancher, offered Old Ben ten thousand dollars if he would lead them to the mine. Old Ben just chuckled and remarked that he could dig up that amount in less than a week.

BEFORE he died, however, Sublett relented and took several men into his confidence. Once on one of his trips to the mine, he met an old friend named Mike Wilson. He was apparently in high good humor, for he gave Wilson such detailed directions for finding the mine that Wilson actually reached it.

Surprised and jubilant at finding the mine, Wilson determined to carry away all the ore possible. He even dumped his provisions and loaded his tow-sack, and then headed for home. When he arrived home he went on a bender that lasted three weeks. Sober again, he tried to find the mine a second time, but was unable to do so. Old Ben

refused to direct him again. "Anybody wants that mine bad enough, let him go hunt for it same's I did."

Another time, Sublett was making the trek to his mine when, about sundown, he sighted a party of campers. Being a friendly man he made for the camp, and was surprised on reaching it to find that a friend of his, by the name of Stewart, was in charge. Stewart told Sublett that he was guiding several railroad officials on a hunt, and invited him to spend the night with them. Sublett unhitched and sat down to make small talk with Stewart until the hunters were asleep. But, once the camp was quiet, he told Stewart that he was on the way to his gold mine *at the point of the Guadalupes.*

He told Stewart that during the day's ride he had begun to realize how old he had become, and that this was to be his last trip to the mine.

"I have always insisted that the secret would die with me," he told Stewart. "But somehow I feel that I'd like to show you the mine."

Stewart said that he couldn't possibly leave the men who had hired him to guide them. He added, moreover, that the Guadalupes were the range of the murderous Apaches. Sublett retorted that any man traveling with him need never fear an attack from Indians. But Stewart refused to accompany him.

The next morning, however, when Sublett continued his journey, Stewart went with him for some distance. When they halted, Stewart scanned the foothills with his spyglass, while Sublett gave him directions for locating the mine. He insisted, however, that such directions would never lead Stewart to the mine. Then he left, saying he would return in about three days.

True to his word Old Ben drove into camp three days later. After supper, when the hunters had rolled up in their blankets, Stewart asked: "Did you have any luck?"

Sublett smiled, picked up a deer hide, turned it flesh side up, and poured out a Bull Durham sack (fifteen cent size) full of gold nuggets. They glittered in the firelight, and Stewart ran his hands through them.

"No small ones here," he said.

"No sense picking up small ones when I can turn up big ones with one more rake in the gravel," Sublett drawled.

Sublett left the next morning. Stewart made many subsequent attempts to find the mine but failed.

The story of Sublett's mine has been told in every town, squatter's cabin, and rancher's home from the mouth of the Pecos down to old Fort Sumner on the Rio Grande. Sublett's son Ross, now living in Carlsbad, is still looking for it. Should you ever have occasion to interview him, he will tell you that he made the trip to the mine with his father when he was nine years old, and that as he remembers it, the last part of the trip going west from the Pecos was made on horseback. He will tell you, also, that the mine is in a crevice and can only be reached by a rope ladder; and though a cave is the main source of the gold, there is plenty of ore lying in the open. He is certain that the mine is within six miles of a spring in the Rustler Hills.

Old Ben died in 1892. On his deathbed, his son tried to get him to describe the route to the mine, but the old man merely mumbled:

"It's too late. Directions wouldn't help you, son. You'll just have to hunt for it same's I did."

It has never been found. Old Ben kept his vow and took the Secret of the Guadalupes to the grave with him!

FLOAT A CANNONBALL

The average miner, returning to civilization and restaurant chow, missed the vicious brew of coffee that was usually part of his daily diet when on location. Brewed in one- or two-quart pots, it was made with a little water, heaps of coffee and plenty of fierce boiling. Its thick, vicious bitterness was tempered with a generous amount of canned milk and sugar. "Miner's coffee" wasn't the real article unless it could float a cannonball.

J.W.Q.

DERELICT'S SHOWDOWN

By D. B. NEWTON

HE DRIFTED into the Gold Strike saloon along toward midafternoon, when the place was nearly empty. It was big and dim and cool inside, and streaks of damp sawdust showed on the newly swept floor. Nose tingling at the sour tang of whiskey, the stranger ran his eye across empty gaming tables and a big covered wheel of fortune. A girl with peroxided hair and a short spangled dress sat listlessly at one of the tables, fooling with a deck of cards. The stranger passed her by, spotted the battered upright piano over by the dance floor and studied it with the eye of an expert.

The stranger's name was John Fallon, but he had been called things like "Professor" so long now that he hardly remembered. He went to the bar, leaned a threadbare elbow against it, playing with a coin and waiting for the bartender to finish talking to a couple of men and sell him a drink.

The men wanted to see Wade Cameron. They were quite persistent, and there was a certain dangerous quality about them that drew John Fallon's attention. The pair might be brothers; big men both, with the hard hands and rough clothing of farmers or stockmen. And they shared an air of desperation.

"Cameron ain't come in yet," the bartender insisted, face and voice unfriendly. "You either wait or drop back later."

"Aw, let's go, Harry!" one of them grunted, turning away angrily. "Guess the barkeep is tellin' it straight."

They clumped out, taking with them a certain suppressed anger. The barkeep slapped a towel against the polished pine counter, muttering under his breath. Then he shot a narrow glance at Fallon.

"Beer," said Fallon.

The barkeep eyed Fallon dubiously—his badly worn and badly fitting broadcloth suit, and the pallor of the wasted features—until Fallon shrugged and put down the coin and shoved it across. Only when the barkeep saw the color of Fallon's money did he bring out a mug, tap it full and foaming, and spin it into Fallon's hand.

It was not good beer, but Fallon drank it slowly, tasting it. There were just the three of them in the room now—he, and the girl, and the loosejowled barkeep. Setting down his glass, Fallon asked:

"Need someone to work the music b[illegible]?"

John Fallon hadn't the guts to take the vengeance that had kept him alive for ten lonely, bitter years.

"Boss ain't in," the aprons told him shortly.

Fallon went over to the piano, laid his battered hat on top, and lifted the lid from broken and yellow keys. He ran his fingers over them, casually. The tuning was abominable, and a number of the hammers were broken; nevertheless, he eased himself onto the chair and, hesitantly at first, began to play.

Slumped there, he tossed out the stupid barroom music that was all he ever was allowed to play. Only, there was a difference in it—something of disillusionment, and despair. The bartender scowled but said nothing, his eyes on the stranger. A prosperous looking cattleman, who came in for a drink, stayed for a long time, listening. And something in that music made the girl in the spangled dress put down her cards, go to the piano and lean against it, looking down into the player's face.

Fallon glanced at her briefly. He had seen her type a hundred times—the false color of the hair, the painted whiteness of her tired and hardened face.

She said: "Golly, Professor—I never heard anyone make a piano talk like that before!"

He scarcely heard her, lost in the spell his own fingers wove on the yellow keys. Not barroom music now. Almost imperceptibly the style of it had changed as he abandoned himself to his mood. He knew this was wrong. Always, when this happened, those who hired him failed to understand the things he played and they would scoff and throw him again into the street.

But he could not help himself. And now, as the lowering sun speared through the opening above the batwings, a strange, disturbing melody poured across the stillness.

The girl exclaimed: "Say! That's a new one on me, Professor! What is it—? But he stared through her, seeing another face than hers.

Radiant, that remembered face seemed against the shadows of the cheap saloon. He heard a sweet voice, singing once more across the years the song that he was playing the song he had written for her. . . .

A heavy voice behind him muttered: "So! It's you!"

Fallon stopped playing, abruptly; twisted about. And then he turned suddenly cold to the very ends of his fingers. At sight of that darkly handsome face, the full-lidded eyes shining in hatred and contempt, a fury leaped up in him that had waited so long for release that it had nearly been smothered in apathy.

The man who stood at his back said: "I'd never have known you, Fallon, except for that damn song you were playing. You've come a long way from the concert halls, haven't you?" The heavy lips twisted into a sneer, the eyes froze. He jerked a thumb toward the batwings. "Get out! Don't let me lay eyes on you again—you broken derelict!"

The darkly handsome man turned brusquely, leaving Fallon with hands knotted into trembling fists, and took his heavy tread across the room.

The dark man had filled out in these ten years, grown sleeker, stockier. Carefully tailored clothing showed the state of his finances, as did the arrogant bearing of his manner.

The bartender nodded obsequiously as he passed and then suddenly remembered and called after him:

"Oh, Mr. Cameron. Them Thomson boys was in awhile ago, lookin' for you. They'll probably be back."

The big man had halted. He fiddled with a cigar cutter on his watch chain and a pleased look came over his dark face. "Good enough. Send them right in to my office."

"But I think they're lookin' for trouble," said the barkeep. "You better be careful— Hey, they're comin' now!"

"Just send them in." A door closed behind him.

Seconds later the batwings were pushed wide and the two who had been here before—the Thomsons—came in. They shot a questioning look at the barkeep aprons and saw his nod toward the inner door. Without a word they went that way.

ONLY then did John Fallon shake loose of his emotions and come trembling to his feet.

The girl asked: "You know Wade Cameron, Professor?"

Fallon shrugged, not answering. Wade Cameron—no! It had been Sam McKail, those many years ago. But the name didn't

matter. It was the dark face, the sleek body —and the black heart within.

John Fallon had waited so long, and then when the moment came—he had let it escape him. His hand slipped into the pocket of his coat, fingered the small-caliber derringer. The touch of the cold steel told Fallon exactly what he had to do.

There would be an outside door to Cameron's office; a window at least. Taking himself carefully in hand, Fallon walked out of the Gold Strike and into the hot blast at the end of afternoon. He realized then that he had left his hat inside, on the piano, but he did not go back for it. He loitered a moment, until he was sure no one watched him; then he ducked into an alleyway next the saloon and at once saw the door he wanted.

It opened onto a long dark hall splitting the rear half of the building. Gaming rooms were back here, and one door that had Cameron's name painted on it. Fallon flattened himself against the wall near this door, and waited.

He heard angry voices—Harry Thomson and his brother—arguing hotly . . . and Cameron's own cool, unruffled tones. Something about money the brothers owed, a note to be paid or Cameron would take certain lands and cattle as forfeit. Fallon did not listen. He knew only a great impatience that, having waited all this time, they should keep him waiting now.

Then he faded farther back in the shadows as the door was wrenched open and the Thomsons came slamming out, desperate scowls on their faces. Only when they were gone, and the corridor again lay empty, did Fallon step quietly, turn the knob; let himself into Cameron's office and close the door with his back against it.

"I've come to kill you," John Fallon said.

Cameron was standing behind a big pine desk, about to clip the end from a cigar with the cutter on his watch chain. A certain sly, pleased expression was on his thick features; it slid off and fear replaced it for a moment as he saw the derringer. Then he caught himself, put the fear out of his face and made it blank and unreadable.

"You were always a fool!" Cameron said bluntly. "Don't you know you wouldn't leave this town alive?"

"I suppose that's right," Fallon agreed. "Then what good would it get you? Revenge, or something melodramatic like that?"

"Don't laugh!" snapped Fallon. "For ten years you've been laughing, haven't you, at the ease with which you came and took Alice from me? I learned afterwards the lie you told; afterwards, when it was too late. You always had a glib tongue. You could even make a decent woman like Alice believe the slimy things you said about me—and turn her against me. I've hunted ten years to find you, and kill you for that lie!"

An ugly sneer tugged at Cameron's mouth. "Go ahead and pull the trigger, then! But what's past is past. And supposing Alice had married you, instead of me—what would you have given her? Music, I suppose? Bah! She'd have tired of that in a year: your hand-to-mouth existence—cheap hotel rooms—drafty concert halls—"

"And just what have you given her?"

Cameron allowed himself a smile. "Plenty, Fallon, that you never could. Security. A name that means something. Wade Cameron will be moving out of this saloon business before long. I've money invested in lands and mortgages that are going to pay off soon. Already there's feelers out at the State capitol. You may see me in the senate, one of these days. And Alice will share in these things, when they come. For that matter, take a look here from the window."

Sunset made a flame in the wide sky; and set against it on a hill at the edge of town Fallon saw a stately, tall white house, with pillars at the front and green lawns stretching away from it. "Could you have given her that?" Cameron demanded.

For a long time, Fallon stood miserably silent, the derringer and its purpose somehow forgotten. At last he said, faltering: "There's other things. Love—"

Cameron scoffed. "Can't you get it through your head that she made her choice? Her love belongs to me!"

At that, Fallon snapped a hard look at the man's face. "You took it on the strength of a lie! If she had known the truth—if she knew it now—"

"All right!" Cameron's voice was harsh, crisp. "Come with me to see her! We'll face her together—now! Tell her the truth if you like—and let her choose again!"

"Yes!" cried John Fallon. His face felt suddenly ashen, his limbs trembling. "To

see her! Now!" The derringer was in his pocket again.

Cameron seized a pearl-gray Stetson from the desk. "You asked for it! She'll be up at the house. Come along!"

THEY went beneath the shade trees of the town, and up the slope toward the big white house. Wade Cameron strode firmly, face expressionless; John Fallon, at his side, went with a hot, frenzied eagerness that could hardly keep his pace to a walk. They made an odd pair, the man of affluence and the derelict in his threadworn clothing.

And then something died in Fallon, slowly, and his step lagged. The force of all Cameron had said struck him suddenly, like a blow. What could John Fallon offer to a woman now? He was already old, a hopeless, homeless derelict. In face of this, a thing like that old perfidy of Cameron's would not weigh heavily, after so many years.

Terror swept him. "Wait!" he exclaimed. Cameron stopped to face him. Fallon took in again the large, well-groomed frame of the man, and shook his head. "You're right—and I'm a crazy fool! It would do no good. I—I don't want to go up there."

Cameron said carefully: "You're absolutely sure?"

"I couldn't go through with it. I wouldn't want to let her see me again—like this. I—I'll be leaving town tonight."

Wade Cameron considered this a moment thoughtfully. He said, gruffly, then: "I'm not without conscience, Fallon. But it's too late to undo what's been done. Here!" He drew out a thick wad of bills, peeled off several, and shoved them into a pocket of Fallon's coat. "Maybe that'll come in handy!" And before Fallon could answer, he turned on his heel, continuing, with his long stride, up toward the house against the sunset.

John Fallon stayed for a long time where he was, so numbed in mind and feelings that the next step, the next thing to do, was an impossible enigma. He had lived ten years for one thing—and now, of his own will, had rejected the chance at it. He felt the familiar weight of the derringer, sagging in his pocket—meaningless, now.

Graying hair tossed by a night breeze made him think of his battered hat, left on the piano in the Gold Strike. A man without a hat seemed to have no pride left to him at all. Smiling a little, grimly, at this bit of philosophy, Fallon buttoned his coat against the chill that came with fading sunset. He started slowly down the hill toward lights that were coming on, here and there, in the town.

At the door of the saloon he turned in, went to the piano and put on the shapeless hat. He looked at the piano keys a moment, then lowered the lid over them. He wondered if he would ever play again, even for his eats. Music to him meant Alice, and now he must do what he should have done years ago—forget her!

He was standing like that when the inner door flew open and the blonde girl entered. She was breathless. She hurried to the bar, put both hands on it and leaned across to the barkeep. Fallon could just hear what she said:

"Have you seen the boss? Those Thomsons just sneaked out of his office lookin' mean, and they had guns in their hands. I think they're goin' up to the house after him—"

Without any hesitation, John Fallon turned and went out of the Gold Strike. He started up to Cameron's house that way at a quick walk, changed it to a shambling run.

His wind failed him, but he went on with sobbing breath and a catch that came into his side. Lights were on in the big house now. Alice would be there! He wouldn't see her if it could be avoided, but for her sake he had to warn Cameron.

The wide lawns of Cameron's home opened ahead. Fallon paused at the edge of them, leaned a hand against a tree trunk while he sobbed for lost breath. He caught sight of Cameron, suddenly, striding up the steps to the broad veranda. Giving a yell, Fallon started running forward out of the edge of the trees.

CAMERON'S face twisted in anger and he cried: "So you came after all!" His hand jerked up and flame spurted in it, a gun cracked flatly in the high, still air. Pain struck Fallon in the side and the earth slipped dizzily from under his feet.

He fell heavily, sprawled on the short grass with that awful agony in him and bewilderment in his mind. But he couldn't

give up. He managed to roll over, got his hands against the turf and used them to push himself erect again.

Cameron had disappeared into the house after that one shot, leaving the big door standing blackly open behind him. Fallon went after him at a staggering run; for Cameron still had to be warned. The man just didn't understand—

John Fallon made the low stone steps with an effort, got across the veranda and into the big front room. It was empty. He leaned back against the edge of the doorway a moment, gasping, pain-bright eyes roving while he fought for strength.

He saw massive furniture, in the worst of taste. And there was a smoking stand, a deer's head over the fireplace, a rack for guns. But not a sign of any feminine thing. Fallon knew at once that this was wrong.

Across the room a door opened, and Wade Cameron stood framed, a six-shooter still in his hand. At sight of Fallon, alive and on his feet, he brought it up into line. Above it his face was an ugly snarl.

"Where is she?" John Fallon demanded.

Cameron sneered. "Not here, you fool! I only told you that and suggested bringing you here, so as to get you to put that derringer away. Then when you backed out and promised to leave town, I got soft and let you go; otherwise you'd been dead by now. I can't allow a thing like you to bob up out of my past when I'm over at the capitol."

"Where is she?" Fallon repeated.

"Dead!" The other snapped out the word cruelly. "Eight years ago. She didn't like it so well with me. She found out the lie I told her about you, and hated me ever after that." He laughed harshly as he added: "I'd just as soon given her back to you, if I'd known where you were. But she caught a fever. Didn't last long with it."

The fury boiled over in John Fallon. His right hand dropped toward the pocket that held the waiting derringer. Wade Cameron pulled trigger. Fallon felt lead strike him somewhere. It drove him back against the edge of a massive table and, propped there, he got his hand on the derringer and he fired through the cloth of the pocket. Cameron's body jerked. He pulled trigger once more, down into the hardwood floor, before he fell.

Fallon took his hand out of his pocket, sagged against the table. But despite the pain he was still on his feet—so neither of Cameron's bullets must have struck a vital spot. A little giddy, he peered down through swirling powdersmoke at the still body on the floor.

He murmured: "That was for you, Alice!"

The money Cameron had given him still lay in his pocket. He fingered it. He thought: *I'll use this!* A new suit, a railroad ticket. He had fallen far, but there was still music in him. Music and a memory would lift him up again. And this, too, would be for Alice. Somewhere she would know. She'd be watching him, loving him; he knew that now. And in whatever crowded concert halls he played—it would be for her alone. Always, music would have the power to bring her back to him.

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The little fat man yelped in alarm. . . .

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

CHAPTER 1 *Vigilante Warning*

Very carefully Weatherley adjusted the black shoe-string tie in front of the dresser mirror. With a brush and comb he worked for fully two minutes on his sleek black hair, noticing and smiling a little at the few gray hairs he discovered. His face was finely chiseled, very white, the color of the professional gambler. He sported a brief mustache above a set of gleaming white teeth.

Brushing off his black frock coat, he slipped it on over a flower-embroidered vest. His shirt was of the finest linen, spotless white; his boots glistened in the light of the table lamp.

He studied himself for several long moments in the mirror, making sure that every

TINHORN TRAIL TO NOWHERE

item of his attire was in order. Each night for five years he'd been going through this procedure, and it had become more a ritual than a means of dressing himself.

Tonight, going through these ceremonies for the last time, he felt some sadness, but not bitterness. He was past the age where disappointment, or the wrong fall of the cards, affected him. He'd learned to accept each deal as it was made.

Coming back to the table, he sat down and picked up the deck of cards, his long, white fingers shuffling them smoothly, mechanically, but his blue-gray eyes riveted on the small cardboard placard which had been placed on the table against the base of the lamp.

The pieces of cardboard was five inches long and three inches high, and on it were the numbers in black—"6-3-6." Six, mean-

Gripping Frontier Action Novelette

★ ★

Before the vigilantes ran him out of Silver Bow at midnight, Gambler John Weatherley wanted to do one last good turn for the little town he had grown to love.

ing six feet long; three, meaning three feet wide; six again, meaning six feet deep—the size of a man's grave. Also, the sign of the vigilantes, wherever vigilante committees were organized.

The card had been placed on the table in his room the previous night while he was in the Grand Palace gambling house. With the card went the very poignant stipulation that Gambler John Weatherley rode out of Silver Bow in twenty-four hours, or the 6-3-6 grave would be his.

It was seven o'clock in the evening now, which still gave him till midnight tonight. Knowing Moss Farrel, head of the Silver Bow Vigilantes, Weatherley realized that he was as safe as a baby in a crib until midnight. After that, Farrel, a rock-ribbed rancher from the basin country, would hang John Weatherley—or his own brother—if he ignored the vigilante notice. Farrel was like that.

Gravely, Weatherley set out the cards on the table, solitaire fashion, and this was another part of the time-honored ritual. He played one set of solitaire before going down to the hotel dining room for his supper and his single glass of wine. Many times he'd had that glass of wine with Moss Farrel, and had enjoyed the small talk which followed.

He wondered tonight whether Farrel would be in the dining room when he came down. Knowing the man, he did not think it impossible. Farrel had liked him, but Farrel had a duty to perform. Silver Bow was growing up; it was becoming a respectable town, which meant that the footpads, the touts, the hangers-on and the professional gamblers had to go.

Every man in Silver Bow without any visible means of supporting himself honestly, was being carefully considered by the vigilantes. A dozen men had already skipped town. Weatherley had been expecting the ultimatum daily, yet when it arrived he'd felt that vague regret. In his eighteen years as a professional gambler he'd worked in dozens of towns. But he'd liked Silver Bow. He liked the people; he liked the buildings, the hotel in which he lived and ate; he even liked the gambling house in which he worked.

Years ago a change from one town to another had meant nothing. He'd been almost glad when the honest element finally took over the reins and began passing out the 6-3-6 cards. He'd been restless those days and he wanted new sights. Now the change meant adjustment—acclimating himself to new conditions. It signified that a man was getting old when he balked at this.

The solitaire game fizzled out before he had half the cards set on the table. Gathering them up, he placed the cards back in the package and then stared at the placard again. He was frowning as he took his black, flat-crowned hat from the dresser, brushed it a little and set it on his head.

He lighted a long, thin Mexican cigar before turning out the lamp. His carpetbag, packed, stood next to the dresser, ready to be picked up tonight. He'd already booked passage on the midnight stage, bound for the Coast.

Blowing out the lamp, he stood for several long moments in the darkness, head down on his chest. Then, straightening himself, he walked to the door and went out.

He sat at his usual corner table in the dining room. Dolly McLane, the waitress, had his bottle of wine and the wine-glass ready for him. There were two girls waiting on tables in the hotel dining room, but Dolly McLane always waited on him.

Three years before Dolly had come into the Grand Palace, beaten, bewildered, both parents having died in a prairie fire. She had no money, no place to live, and she'd come to the Grand Palace to work as a percentage girl.

Weatherley had spotted her before she even got to Jack Fallon's private office. He'd talked her out of it, advanced fifty dollars out of his own pocket, and got her the job at the hotel. Now she was engaged to marry a promising young rancher from the basin country.

Weatherley noticed that his copy of the Silver Bow *Arrow,* the local newspaper, was neatly folded on the right side of his plate. A clean napkin lay under the paper. There was a glass of water to his left with a small sprig of yellow-colored prairie flowers in the glass. They were the only flowers in the dining room. Each night Dolly McLane saw to it that there were flowers on John Weatherley's table.

"They are very pretty," the gambler smiled. His white teeth flashed, and the sincerity was plain in his eyes. He saw the girl flush with pleasure, and he was think-

ing that he'd done one good deed in the town of Silver Bow. She would make the young rancher a fine wife.

Weatherly broke off one of the sprigs and stuck it in the lapel of his coat before picking up the menu. He noticed then that another plate had been set out on the opposite side of the table. He glanced at this over the menu, and then at Dolly McLane.

"Mr. Farrel is in town," the waitress explained. "I thought he might be dining with you tonight."

WEATHERLEY nodded. It had been Moss Farrel's custom when in Silver Bow on business to wait for him before having his supper. Weatherley had his evening meal at exactly seven thirty. The big clock on the wall indicated seven thirty-one now.

Moss Farrel came through the door, big shoulders filling the space. Farrel had a hard, bony face, a bulldog jaw, and piercing blue eyes. His hair was beginning to turn gray, but his body was as tough as it had been twenty years before when he was rated the strongest man in Silver Bow. And he'd bent horseshoes with his bare hands to prove it.

Weatherley watched as Farrel strode directly toward the table. Then Weatherley smiled, standing up to shake hands. Dolly McLane went away for another wine glass.

Moss Farrel dropped into the chair, making it creak. "How are you, John?" Farrel asked. He was smoking a cigar and puffing on it nervously.

"All right," Weatherley smiled. "Glad to see you, Moss." He poured two drinks when the waitress came with the other glass. He lifted one glass, and he said, "Luck."

Moss Farrel placed the glass down on the table, his big hand nearly hiding it. He said grimly. "I don't like it, John."

John Weatherley shrugged. "It'll be a better town, Moss," he observed.

"No man in this town has ever been able to point a finger at your game," the rancher went on tersely, "but they put it up to a vote the other night. That's how it stands, John."

Weatherley nodded. "My bag is packed. There'll be no trouble, Moss."

"It's a hell of a thing," Moss Farrel growled. "They might just as well chase me out of town."

"I live on another man's losses," Weatherley said. "You sweat for your money, Moss."

Moss Farrel said, "Hell," very emphatically.

Weatherley watched two men coming into the dining room, taking seats on the other side of the room. One man was tall, smooth-shaven and had peculiar bleached hair. He had a big, hooked nose and smoky, grayish eyes. When he smiled he revealed two buck-teeth up front.

"It should be a better town," Weatherley said again, but watching Carl Kramer ordering his meal across the room, he was not sure. Vaguely, he remembered running across Kramer once before, but the details were not clear. Kramer had had another name then, and it had been in the east when Weatherley was a much younger man. He remembered those buck-teeth and the smoky eyes, and he knew that Kramer had been involved in a shady deal.

Coming to Silver Bow five months before, Kramer had set himself up in business on the main street. He'd been buying property in town, spending with a free hand, assuring everyone that he had money to invest and Silver Bow was a growing town. It was rumored that as soon as the railhead reached Towanda, eighty miles to the west, a spur would shoot out to Silver Bow, connecting it with the line. Kramer claimed that Silver Bow would boom and he wanted to grow with the city. Already, he was being pointed out as an enterprising citizen.

Carl Kramer spoke about housing developments, town improvements, a new water supply system, paved streets, and the hundred and one other items which transformed a Western town into a small, sleek city.

The man with Kramer was short, dumpy, with a pot belly and a round head like a pumpkin. He wore big glasses and he had a bulbous nose. His clothes had "lawyer" written all over them.

Watching Kramer and the lawyer, Weatherley did not like it. For the fiftieth time he tried to go back into his memory and unwind that tangled thread which concerned Carl Kramer. Ordinarily, his memory was good. But this had happened so far back, and there had been so much in between.

Moss Farrel was asking. "You made any plans?"

Weatherley shook his head. "Figured on going west," he said, "to the Coast. I'll look around when I get there." He saw the frown on Farrel's wide face.

The rancher said abruptly. "Why don't you get out of this business, John? Go into something else?"

"What?" Weatherley smiled.

"Anything," the rancher snapped. "Damn it, if I'd be hounded like this from town to town."

Weatherley shrugged. He remembered that he was a gambler by profession; no one had forced him into it, and he'd always liked it. He'd been born with the sporting instinct in him, and after he'd learned to accept losses with equanimity it had become a pleasure. He knew no other trade, and no other trade had ever appealed to him.

"Now," Moss Farrel was saying grimly, "if you go into another line of business, even in this town, John, I could have that notice thrown out the window. You can go on living—"

Weatherley was shaking his head. "When I stop gambling, Moss," he stated mildly, "it will be because I no longer enjoy it, not because a vigilante committee made a deal with me."

FARREL nodded. "Didn't think you'd listen to me," he said moodily. "You got a lot of friends in this town, John, and they'll miss you."

"I shall miss Silver Bow," Weatherley said. He had the quick and quaint thought then that he should like to do something for the town to repay it for the pleasant hours he'd spent here. It was a queer thought coming to a man who was being bluntly requested to leave, still it was in the back of his mind when he finished the evening meal with Moss Farrel and leaned back in the chair to light a cigar.

Kramer and the fat man with him were still in earnest consultation on the other side of the room. They were too far away for Weatherley to hear any of the words. Officially, he had not met Kramer because the big man did not frequent the gambling halls, but he'd heard much of him. Even Moss Farrel regarded this Easterner as a godsend to Silver Bow.

"The town needs a man," the rancher observed, "who can get things done. Kramer seems to have many connections."

Weatherley nodded at that, and he was thinking of one connection in particular he did not approve of. A small, wiry man with a misshapen nose, and singularly long arms accompanied Kramer about town, and this man Weatherley had definitely known eight years ago in Abilene. He went by the name of Britton—Con Britton, and in Abilene he'd been known as a very dangerous man with a gun. He'd been willing to turn that gun on any man, including his best friend, if the price were high enough.

Now, Weatherley was positive, Con Britton had a price on his head. Why Carl Kramer, a seemingly honest and upright citizen, paying cash for everything he purchased, needed a killer like Britton, Weatherley did not know. But it confirmed his own private opinion that Kramer's activities in Silver Bow were not as philanthropic as they appeared on the surface.

At exactly eight forty-five, Weatherley pushed his chair back and reached for his hat. He spelled George Cavendish at the faro table in the Grand Palace at nine o'clock sharp, and George did not like to be kept waiting. From nine till eleven Weatherley worked the faro bank in accordance with the agreement made by Jack Fallon, Palace owner. After that Weatherley on his own till daylight, and usually it was stud poker.

"I would imagine," Weatherley said shrewdly, "Fallon will object when he gets one of the cards from your friends."

Moss Farrel shook his head as they walked toward the door to the street. "Fallon expected this for weeks," the rancher explained. "He knows big time gambling is through in Silver Bow."

"He's leaving peacably?" Weatherley asked, lifting his eyebrows.

"Fallon sold his place to Carl Kramer," the rancher said.

Weatherley let that sink in for a moment. He said then, glancing down in Kramer's direction, "Mr. Kramer have a use for it?"

"He might turn it into a Town Meeting hall, or a school house. I don't know."

"Possibly a church," Weatherley suggested innocently. He went out into the night, puffing on the cigar thoughtfully, liking this matter less and less all the time. They walked along the porch toward the steps leading to the boardwalk, and they had to pass close by the window at which

Kramer and his lawyer sat. Weatherley caught just two words, "night stage."

He parted with Moss Farrel at the corner. The rancher promised to see him before he left.

"I have a few hours of grace." Weatherley smiled. He'd already decided that he would spend the last twenty-four hours in Silver Bow exactly the way he'd spent every other day, doing exactly the same things, drinking this cup to the last drop.

CHAPTER 2 One Last Good Turn

Leaving Farrel, he walked north along Main Street, crossing Fremonte at the first intersection, and nodding to Old Man Gormsby who sat under the awning in front of the General Store. Gormsby sat here every night in the shadows, watching everything, smoking a corncob pipe. Weatherly said:

"Good evening, Mr. Gormsby." He was the only person in town who called Gormsby, "Mister," and the old man liked it.

The Paradise Dance Hall was just getting ready to open when Weatherley passed by the doors. Inside, he heard the four-piece orchestra tuning up. The Grand Palace was just beyond the Paradise, and there were six saloons on the same block. Many of these Weatherley knew would go when the reform element climbed into the saddle.

In Silver Bow there had been a number of holdups in recent weeks, one man had been shot in a drunken duel, and two others hit by flying bullets. The vigilantes had been formed immediately to put a stop to the business before Silver Bow got as tough as Towanda.

Weatherley walked into the Grand Palace, and nodded to the languid George Cavendish at the faro table. Cavendish, a slim, blond man with a rosy complexion, winked at him gravely.

Then Weatherley went into Jack Fallon's private office and found Fallon at his desk, a beefy, barrel-shaped man with a nearly-bald head. The owner of the Palace waved a fat hand at Weatherley and pointed to a bottle on the desk and a glass.

Weatherley's eyes flickered. Fallon was so excited that he'd forgotten that John Weatherley had one glass of wine with his evening meal, and no liquor whatever during the night. The fat man was going through the drawers in the desk as if looking for something.

"Pulling out?" Weatherley asked him softly.

Fallon blinked and then grinned, his fat face wrinkling into layers of flesh. "You heard about it?" he asked. "It'll be all over town tomorrow anyway. That damned Bolivar Simms is putting it in his sheet right now."

"What does Kramer want with this place?" Weatherley asked curiously.

Fallon chuckled. "From the talk of him," he observed, "you'd think he was givin' it to the town for a children's playhouse." The fat man laughed deep in his chest—laughed so hard that he started to cough. "It'll be a playhouse, Weatherley," he grinned, "for Barney McCord and his pack."

"Barney McCord," Weatherley murmured. "Where does he come in?" McCord was the big-time gambler in Towanda. He was supposed to own a string of saloons and gambling houses in the tough town.

Jack Fallon sat back in his chair and reached for a cigar. He bit off the end before answering. "You got a ticket, Weatherley, and you're being chased out of town. It don't make any difference to you, or to me. I got a ticket, too, from them damned vigilantes. That's why I got to sell. They mean business."

Weatherley nodded. "They don't want McCord any more than they want you, Jack," he said. "Maybe less."

"It ain't what they want," Fallon observed thinly. "It's what they're gettin', and they're gettin' Barney McCord, and maybe worse than McCord before it's finished."

"How do you know?" Weatherley asked.

"I know Kramer is selling this place to McCord for twice what he's paying me," Fallon growled, "and not only this place, but maybe fifty lots, and a dozen other buildings he now owns. For most of this property Kramer is getting five or six times what he paid for it."

"Who'll be buying it?" Weatherley wanted to know.

"Most of it," Fallon said, "will go to that cheap crowd from Towanda. They'll swarm down here like a pack of damned wolves as soon as the railhead reaches us."

"The railhead," Weatherley said softly.

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"I thought the line was being built to Towanda with a spur reaching here?"

Again Jack Fallon's belly heaved in a deep laugh. "You think a smart crook like Kramer would buy here when it's Towanda that'll have the boom? The railroad was scheduled to shoot the line down to Towanda, but what's to prevent 'em from changing their minds and deciding Silver Bow is a better bet—especially if somebody's talking up Silver Bow the past few months?"

"Carl Kramer?" Weatherley asked.

"I know," Fallon said grimly, "that Kramer's had that cheap lawyer of his sopping back and forth to Junction City conferring with the company officials. He's putting up bribe money; he's talking big, trying to persuade the company Silver Bow is the logical terminus for their line."

"This town," Weatherley stated, doesn't want the railhead." He knew that experienced Westerners like Moss Farrell didn't want Silver Bow to get like Dodge City, like Abilene, like Hays—with all the riff-raff swarming in, crowding out the honest citizens. "If the town doesn't want the railroad," Weatherley stated, "how can the company force it on them?"

"Complete their line just outside the town limits," Fallon explained. "A week after the first train reaches here the town of Silver Bow will extend to the depot. Who can stop that?"

John Weatherley nodded gravely. He remembered now some of the details concerning Carl Kramer. The big man had been involved in a railroad scandal in St. Louis. He knew railroading; he knew how to operate within a board of trustees.

"These vigilantes," Fallon said tersely, "think they're cleanin' up this town. When the railhead reaches here they'll be cleaned out themselves. Or they'll be crowded into a damned small corner and made to stay there."

Weatherley adjusted his string tie before a mirror. He said over his shoulder. "Too bad you can't stay around for that, Jack."

Fallon laughed harshly. He took a small placard out of his desk and tossed it across the room. It fell at Weatherley's feet, and he saw the numbers, 6-3-6, written on it.

"It'll take five or six months," the gambling house owner grated, before the rail-

head gets here. I got twenty-four hours to get out. What can I do?"

Knowing Moss Farrel, Weatherley, said softly, "You'd better get, Jack." He went out then, leaving the fat man cursing to himself. He walked across the now crowded room, nodding to various patrons, and he took Cavendish's place at the faro table. He had his own small, silver-inlaid cardbox.

A man said jokingly, "It'll be a clean game now, boys. Place your bets."

Weatherley smiled. Tonight he played with his mind elsewhere. He heard the sounds around him; he spoke to people occasionally, and he handled the cards with the same smoothness, but one thought kept repeating itself deep back in the recesses of his mind. He owed Silver Bow something, and he wanted to pay it back.

HE FINISHED his stint at the table. The smooth, suave Oakley, another faro dealer, took his place.

"Good crowd," Oakley said.

Weatherley nodded. He stood behind a card game for a few minutes. A player invited him to sit in.

Weatherley shook his head and smiled, and then he went out the side door into the night. It was cool out here in the alley and he could see stars overhead. Instead of going back into the gambling hall, he walked up to the head of the alley and stood on the main street, watching the people passing by.

A buckboard rattled by, and he heard the soft laughter of a girl. Moonlight reflected on the smooth cheeks of Dolly McLane, and the clean-shaven jaw of her escort, young Johnny Bartlett, the rancher.

Up the street he saw a half-dozen men standing on the porch of the Washington Hotel. One of them, towering above the rest, he recognized as Moss Farrel.

A small man came out of the front entrance to the Grand Palace, and paused on the porch while he lighted a cigarette. In the quick flash of the match Weatherley recognized the evil, dissipated features of the tough Con Britton.

Weatherley started to walk up the street then, his jaw tight. He passed the stage office and noticed that the northbound stage to Junction City had not yet come in. He remembered Carl Kramer and the lawyer

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had said something about the night stage.

Turning into the empty office, he pulled up at the counter, nodding politely to Sam Edson, the stage agent.

Edson said, "Another hour before your stage comes in, Mr. Weatherley."

Weatherley nodded. He glanced down the list of names on the book—passengers scheduled for Junction City that night. There were four names. He saw "Amos Picket" at the bottom, and he remembered that Pickett was the name of the fat little lawyer.

"Junction City stage due?" Weatherley asked.

"Fifteen minutes," Edson said. "Expectin' somebody?"

"No," Weatherley said. He went out into the street again and turned up Main till he reached Fremonte. He went down Fremonte and then into a livery stable. The stable was empty.

Not waiting for the hostler, Weatherley saddled a horse in the lantern light, and then made a quick search of the stable, findtwo more lanterns hanging on pegs farther down along the line of stalls. One lantern was lighted, and he blew this out.

Tying the two lanterns to the saddle, Weatherley rode out of the stable, going down the alley to the next street which was Madison. Riding across Madison, he entered another smaller side street which led him to the outskirts of town. Thus far he'd met no one.

The moon was fairly bright and he had no difficulty making a circuit and hitting the Junction City road two miles out of town. He pulled up at the top of a grade here and tied the horse in a stand of tall pines growing close to the roadside.

He squatted down here on his heels and smoked another cigar. He took a Remington .38 vest-pocket pistol from inside his coat and stared at it wryly. He'd never been forced to use this gun in Silver Bow, and that itself was a recommendation for the town.

He had not hurried leaving town, and he knew the Junction City stage was not too far behind him. He saw the lights five minutes later and he heard the clump of the horses' hoofs a mile below, starting up hill.

Without haste, he lighted the two lanterns just behind the top of the hill and set them

in the center of the road. He stepped back then among the trees, smiling a little. George Barkis was the driver on this stage tonight, and there had been no holdups of the stage line for several years. Barkis would be quite surprised when those lanterns suddenly appeared before him at the top of the grade.

Gun in hand, Weatherley waited, hearing the rattle of the stage coming closer and closer. He tied a white silk handkerchief across his nose and mouth, pulling his hat down over his eyes. He gripped part of the handkerchief with his teeth so that when he spoke his voice would be muffled, hard to recognize.

The stage reached the top of the grade, six horses panting, and then Barkis saw the lanterns fifteen yards ahead of him. Weatherley heard him curse, and then he stepped out from behind a tree. He called:

"Get 'em up, friend."

CHAPTER 3 "One Way Tombstone"

The stage driver's face whitened in the moonlight, and his hands shot up toward the sky.

"Jump down," Weatherley ordered. He heard the consternation inside the stage, and as Barkis put one boot on the wheel and came to the ground, Weatherley relieved him of his gun and stepped to the coach window. He said, "All out, boys. This is a holdup."

"Damn it!" George Barkis was mumbling. "Why, damn it!"

The four passengers stumbled out into the night, the fat little Amos Pickett coming last, gripping a leather folder in his hands. Weatherley didn't bother to search the men. As Pickett walked past him, he snatched the leather case from the lawyer's hands, grinning behind the handkerchief when the little man yelped in alarm.

"Everybody in again," Weatherley said. "Get up there, driver."

"Now that folder—" Pickett started to protest.

"Get in," Weatherley told him patiently. He waited till they were all inside the coach again and the bewildered George Barkis up on the box. Then, lifting his gun, he shot into the air. The six horses broke away

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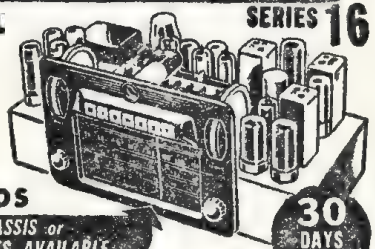

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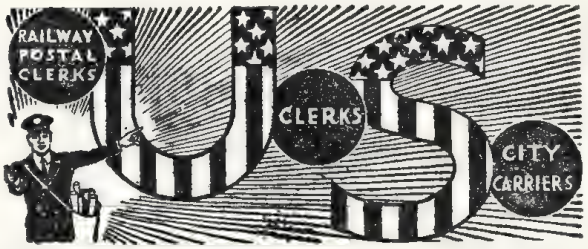

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violently, nearly knocking the driver from the box. The stage whirled off the road, around the two lanterns, and then down the grade, Barkis hauling in on the reins, and yelling to stop them.

The leather folder under his arm, Weatherley rode back to Silver Bow, taking the same route on which he'd come. He went through the back alleys, entering the stable. A hostler was rubbing down a black horse, and Weatherley nodded to him. He tied his own horse in one of the stalls without unsaddling, and then walked to a bale of hay and sat on it.

Opening the leather folder, he went through the papers inside, reading snatches from various letters. He'd been positive that Carl Kramer had been using Pickett as the go-between in the dealings with the railroad company. The letters and documents inside the folder proved that abundantly. Kramer *was* urgently requesting the railroad company to run their tracks to Silver Bow instead of Towanda.

Replacing the papers, Weatherley slipped the folder under his coat and walked out of the stable. The hostler had taken no particular notice of him as he sat on the bale.

He walked up to the main street, crossed the road and knocked on the door of Bolivar Simms' Silver Bow *Arrow*.

The gray-haired, long-faced man sat behind his desk, alone. He said, "Good evening, Weatherley. Come to say good-bye?"

The gambler smiled and placed the folder on the editor's desk. He said. "Thought you'd like to see this, Bolivar." He sat down in a chair on the other side of the room then and lighted a thin Mexican cigar. He watched Simms curiously open the folder and take out the batch of papers. He saw the tight lines begin to appear in the man's jaw.

Ten minutes later when Simms leaned back in the chair, Weatherley said:

"Surprise you, Bolivar?"

"He told me this morning," Simms grated, "that he didn't want the railhead to come to Silver Bow. He didn't want this town spoiled."

"What can you do?" Weatherley asked.

"I'll print this," Simms snapped, "and it'll be on the streets tomorrow. This will ruin Carl Kramer in Silver Bow."

"What about the railroad?"

"We'll take a delegation to Junction City," Simms said. "I think we can convince them that Kramer was playing a crooked game, trying to get them to lay track here so that he could make a small fortune for himself. With these letters I can prove he was working both ends against the middle."

Weatherly stood up, the cigar in his mouth. He held out his hand and he said, "Good luck, Bolivar."

"How did you get this?" Simms asked curiously.

"Maybe," Weatherly chuckled, "I held up the Junction City stage."

Simms grinned at that one also, and then the smile faded from the editor's face. He said perplexedly, "I don't quite get this, Weatherley. You're being run out of town tonight, and yet you bother to protect the town."

"Maybe," Weatherley said, "I liked this town, Bolivar."

"Can I print that?" Simms wanted to know.

"You can chisel it," Weatherley said, "on my tombstone." He went out then, and he knew he was being watched. A figure that looked like Con Britton scurried into the darkness. Weatherley walked up the street, passing the Palace, and then the Paradise dance hall.

Moss Farrel was standing on the porch of the Washington Hotel, alone, hat pulled over his eyes. He said when Weatherley came up, "So this is it?"

"You won't have any trouble with me," Weatherley smiled.

"We never have," Farrel told him. They shook hands. Weatherley saw the west-

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bound stage standing outside the stage office. It was not due to pull out for several minutes. Both men looked at the stage in silence. Then Moss Farrel said huskily:

"Damn you, John." He walked away then, disappearing inside the hotel.

WEATHERLEY walked on to his own hotel. He nodded to the clerk at the desk and started up the stairs. He felt the sprig of prairie flowers in his coat lapel and he noticed that they were wilted. He went down the dimly-lit corridor toward his room, slipping the key out of one pocket with his left hand, and the Remington out of the other with the right.

He opened the door and stepped inside quickly, shifting over to his own left as he did so. He saw the orange flame and he heard the terrific roar of the gun, filling the tiny room. He felt the slug tear through his left shoulder, jerking him back against the wall, and then he fired twice.

He slid to the floor then, the gun in his hand, waiting for another shot. He heard a man sighing faintly. There was a peculiar rustling sound, and then silence. The clerk downstairs was calling nervously.

"There's been a shooting!"

Weatherley got up and walked in the darkness to the table. He felt the blood sliding down inside his coat sleeve and his shirt. With his right hand he took off the lamp globe and lighted the wick. He saw Con Britton lying on his back, face toward the ceiling. Britton's shirt front was red with blood. He was dead.

Weatherley dropped the Remington in his coat pocket and bent to pick up the carpetbag. He went out into the hall, and hearing the noise below, walked to a rear staircase and went down that, his left arm hanging limp. He went out a side door and then walked up toward the main street.

He saw the crowd running toward the hotel, drawn by the shots, and he crossed the road leisurely to the stage office, climbing into the waiting stage. The wound, he told himself, would have to be dressed at the next stop. It was not too bad.

The stage started to move and Weatherley huddled himself in a corner, feeling a sudden weariness, a sickness of mind and body. He watched the lights in the houses and saloons. He passed the Grand Palace.

TINHORN TRAIL TO NOWHERE

They were going up the grade out of town, riding in darkness now with only the moonbeams coming through the open windows. There were two other passengers in the stage. One of them said by way of making conversation:

"A nice little town, Mister."

John Weatherley stared into the darkness. He said softly, "Friend, you'll never know."

THE END

CALL ME BOSTON

(Continued from page 64)

Boston stared at him unbelievingly. "You mean you can? And you will? When?"

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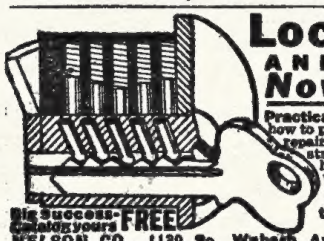

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(Continued from page 70)

table, Brother Talon hadn't moved. His head and shoulders lay on the table, He might have been tired and asleep, but it wasn't that. Brother Talon was dead.

The men in the room gathered around the table, and after a moment John Hall came over to where Bill was sitting, holding his wounded arm.

"I shall not want to refer to this again," John Hall said slowly, "but the jewels you described have been worn by Brother Talon's wife and daughters. The jewels will be returned. You can deliver them to your sheriff and tell him whatever you wish. We expect little in the way of understanding."

Bill Abby frowned. These Mormons were a stubborn people, probably made that way by the persecution they had suffered. It would be a long time before they could learn to live with neighbors, or perhaps before their neighbors could learn to accept them.

"You have been hurt," John Hall said. "I shall care for your wound in a moment, and of course you will stay with me until you are able to ride again."

Bill Abby nodded. He could ask for little more than this. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. At least, he told himself, he had his father's watch back again, and three men who would have always have stood in the way of any understanding between the Mormons and the rest of the country, had been eliminated. More important, he had gained some little understanding of these strange people. Perhaps this side trip had been worth while. It would delay his trip to the Wind River country, but a few days here would add to his understanding.

"Ready?" John Hall asked the young cowpuncher.

Bill Abby got to his feet and walked with John Hall to the door. Rudd's body had been carried away. Hall opened the door and they stepped out into the street and into a crowd of people. What these people knew of what had happened, Bill couldn't guess. But they didn't seem so unfriendly now as they had when he had ridden into Saugus. In fact, come to think about it, they looked just about like other people.

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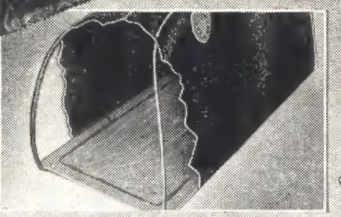

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